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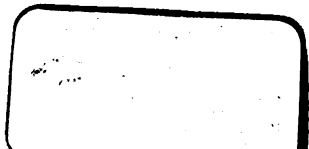
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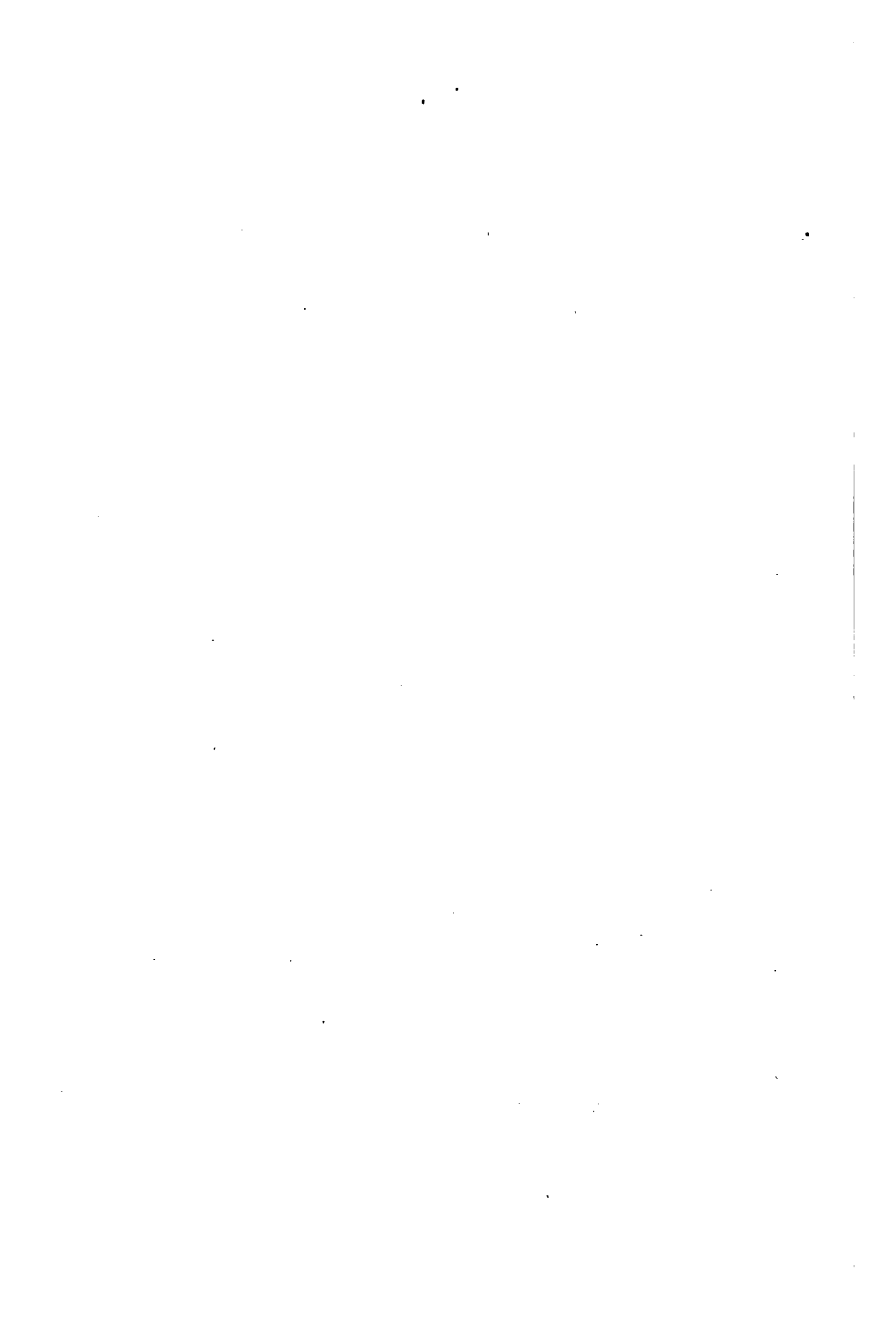
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# A KNAVE AND A FOOL.

*A NOVEL.*

BY

JESSIE KRIKORIAN,

AUTHOR OF "SPOKEN IN ANGER," ETC., ETC.

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

VOL. II.

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## A KNAVE AND A FOOL.

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### CHAPTER I.

“ And all the maiden empire of her mind,  
Lay like a map before me, and I saw,  
There, where I hoped myself to reign as king,  
There, where that day I crowned myself as king,  
There in my realm, and even on my throne, *another !* ”

**L**AWYER BORRODAILE was very busy ; the little man felt that he had his four puppets well in hand, and he meant them only to move as he pulled the wires. Stalwart

Colonel Walrond would have been very much astonished had he known that he was puppet number one, and warranted only to move at Borrodaile's pleasure. Our stately Bernice scarcely looked like an automaton, the suppressed power lurking round her tender little mouth surely gave the lie to any such insinuation—yet she was puppet number two. Old Ghauntly and John Borrodaile completed the quartette, but I am sadly afraid the last-named worthies were perfectly conscious of their moral degradation.

A perfect Mephistopheles was our little Stephen; he found John poor, and he made him rich—in the world's eyes at least that judges only by the outward seeming. He altered his appearance so



successfully that even old Jeal was for several hours deceived by his short, black beard, the dark hair completely altering the expression of his face; and finally, he offered him a Marguerite, fair as she who wrought Faust's ruin.

Stephen showed himself possessed of some romance too when he re-christened John. Anthony St Clare was the name he chose; and Anthony St Clare, with his pleasant manner and handsome face, soon became one of the lions of Walrond. It was an accepted fact that the young ladies, one and all, set their caps at him; from the doctor's daughter—a damsel neither young nor passing fair, down to little Miss Stuart who earned a scanty living by training such music as abode in

the youthful Walrondites. And many a rosy-cheeked village lass dreamed dreams of the debonair, chatty stranger; for no maiden, however humble her station, but has a secret *chateau en Espagne* wherein the fairy prince who wedded with his scullery-maid lives right royally. Lady Grace pronounced him charming; and Lord Elmsden, himself, rather slow of speech, was quite taken by this young man's rattling versatile fund of small talk; Marjorie flirted with him in her prettiest manner, and as for old Ghauntly he was perfectly cringing in his hospitality.

John's nature, essentially careless and selfish, drifted into the new life without thought of the past. Anyone who was with him might lead and rule this easy-

going young man ; while under poor Bet's influence he had been perfectly sincere in his wish to act honourably by her, but now, surrounded by new faces and new pursuits, the dark, fond, peasant face faded from his memory. It was not that he fell in love with Bernice ; had she been portionless he would never have given her a single thought ; and an irritating feeling of inferiority made him somewhat uneasy under the scrutiny of those clear dark eyes ; yet she was very gracious to him.

“ Devilish pleasant to you, John,” Stephen said.

“ Pleasant !” John answered. “ Then you would call a statue pleasant ; that girl sees through me, old man—”

“ Don't be a fool ; how can she see

through you, as you call it? a country minx who has been taught to think herself a goddess! A little of the reality of life would do her an immense amount of good;" and Stephen's eyes gleamed, savagely.

But the village, noticing this friendship between Bernice and the stranger, fancied they had discovered the chain that bound him to Walrond, and a whisper arose, and spread quickly into a many-tongued report, that Anthony St Clare and Miss Ghauntly were engaged.

Bernice was not "engaged," and, as usually is the case when one's neighbours kindly arrange our affairs, was the last to hear of her new honours; thus she was perfectly unconscious of the unnecessary

pain which she was causing the squire, on whom the announcement of this engagement fell like a thunder-bolt; he felt perfectly stunned.

He had been so careless in his wooing, he realised now — now that this fair white flower belonged to another. He was by nature a slow man, seldom in all his life had he acted from mere impulse; he was a modest man too, and apt to underrate any personal advantages he might possess; but the very fact of Miss Ghauntly's accepting Anthony St Clare gave him a strange conceit that if he had only proposed *first* she might have accepted him, and this thought was torture. She had known Mr St Clare for so short a time, surely she could

not love him ! He fancied that he had exalted Bernice on too high a pedestal ; she was only a girl after all, and girl-like, anxious to secure an eligible *parti*. He himself was eligible, he possessed moneys and goodly lands, and his wife would be a great lady, in Walrond at least. If this beautiful queen-like Bernice's mind had only been full of

“Her maiden dignities of hope and love,”

surely he might have tried to win her to himself. A common-place young man he thought Anthony St Clare, and, apart from his longing to marry her himself, he did not fancy this stranger the sort of husband to make Bernice happy. Hot, fierce jealousy burned in his heart, startling

even himself in its revelation of passion hitherto lying dormant and subdued. Though still on the better side of middle age Colonel Walrond was not a young man ; in point of fact he was an old man, in so far that he felt his three-and-forty years more than many *bon-vivants*, grown hoary in a godless life, feel the weight of a score more winters ; but still in his anxiety for our girl's happiness he felt a fitter husband for her than young Anthony St Clare.

That she had been so quickly won was a problem to him ; he knew so little of women and women's ways, and had grown so accustomed to separate them, wheat and bramble-like, in two distinct groups—the good and the bad—that he gave little thought to that strange wilful thing a

young girl's heart. A fair white page often taking many impressions before the master-passion stamps out all faint counterfeits.

It would have been feasible in the eyes of many men had Bernice fallen in love with Anthony as completely and as quickly as Juliet became enamoured of Romeo ; but to practical, honest-hearted Ralph Walrond, this sudden engagement seemed mysterious and unworthy of the woman he delighted to honour.

He was too tender and chivalrous to have asked any woman in marriage on his own heart's impulse ; he would have tried to win her love, step by step, until he felt that she had chosen him as freely as he had chosen her.



Often he had thought of Bernice, "How could she love me, a man almost old enough to be her father?" and this had held him back from any show of affection.

The girl he had only dared to worship from a respectful distance, the proud, dignified woman he had idolized, consenting to marry the first man who had found courage sufficient to ask her! Who was Anthony St. Clair?—a haughty dislike of the man filled his whole being; this man who had crept like a thief in the dark and stolen his treasure. His treasure! what mockery the words were. One day she might have been his treasure, and the next a stranger wooer comes and wins her by the asking.

Was he unjust to this man who perhaps

possessed some hidden power of fascinating? he asked himself. Was he indeed under-rating the mesmeric influence of *love*? True he himself had loved her, and no magnetism had drawn her towards him, but what sympathy could there be between this radiant young life and himself? Had he not been presumptuous maybe even in loving her!

And yet a keen sense of his own clumsy wooing was upon him. Why had he not boldly tried to win her? What had he hoped for in waiting—that she would gradually begin to show an interest in his coming and going, an interest that might have developed into love? He laughed bitterly now, now that all such dreaming was over, laughed at his own

vanity; the vanity of an old fool, he told himself. Anthony St Clare had had no such egotism; young and handsome, not a man going down hill scared and seared by time; Anthony had known that women are won by passionate pleading, not by cold calculating waiting.

And yet the modesty of that very waiting, the deferential homage that approaches love as a devotee approaches a shrine. The love that can bide its time, and wait the seven years of service and never count them long; the love that watched fair Rachel coming through the tall Syrian corn-fields or leading her flock to the old stone well, and saw no change in her sweet face as the patient years went by.

Only a few short months before he had

pictured a future for himself utterly calm and uneventful, and now he was tortured by the pangs of vain love and impotent jealousy. Strange, as it may seem, this was his first love, this love that came in the autumn of his life only to bring unrest and empty longing ; in his youth he had drifted into marriage thoughtlessly, mistaking admiration for love, and now how different were his sentiments. To awaken after seventeen years of peace and know that he had a heart, and realise what love is in all its vivid intensity and utter forgetfulness of self.

Memories of Marjorie's mother came back to him as some vague past in which he had little part or parcel ; a wilful pretty thing who had seemed a mere toy, who had never

filled his life, and who had drifted out of it scarce regretted ; but with Bernice by his side he might have tasted real happiness—and here his thoughts stopped abruptly—would *she* have been happy by his side ?

There came a torturing picture of Bernice as his wife, weary of her bondage, longing for more youthful companionship ; could he have borne *that* ? he asked himself ; was it not better to see her happy, even as Anthony St Clare's wife ? And through all the long vista of future time she would be by Anthony's side, his wedded love !—and as Ralph Walrond ground his heel in the gravel path a darkness disfigured his usually calm face, and his fingers closed in fierce passion round the stick he carried.

“ Ah ! good morning, colonel ; ” the inter-

ruption came from Borrodaile. Borrodaile neat, trim and smiling, jarred terribly on our friend at that moment. He always had a disagreeable feeling that Borrodaile could read his thoughts too, so he smoothed his face, and turned on him rather affably.

“So we shall have a wedding soon,” he said; “a fortunate man, Mr St Clare!”

“A wedding!” exclaimed Borrodaile, quite at sea for the moment. “Oh! I see, you mean Miss Ghauntly—yes, to be sure. A lucky youngster that, as you say, my dear sir, a deuced lucky youngster. It makes old fellows like ourselves quite envious,” and the lawyer leered horribly.

“Who is this Anthony St Clare?” a fierce passion slumbered in Walrond’s

deeply set eyes, an undertone of scorn lay in the half-muttered words.

Borrodaile mentally hugged himself with delight ; as he coarsely expressed it, he had hoped for " a rise out of the colonel before long." All the evil things that coil round humanity, and make it hideous like ill weeds sapping its wholesome strength, were to this man an alphabet by which he read his fellow creatures ; the good, the tenderness, the heroism of which life is capable was but so much time-service, or the thin cloak of pharisaical pride. A certain unconscious dignity had hitherto protected our honest Ralph from this philosopher's plumb-line, but he stood now with his sore hurt bare to those prying unsympathetic eyes.

“I believe his father made a competency by some fortunate speculation; he seems a gentlemanly young man enough; the lady fancied him. Eh, *voilà tout!* old Ghauntly would never have given her to a poor man, so she is lucky in her choice.”

“The engagement seems very sudden;” Walrond despised himself for talking to this man about his lost love, but the temptation was strong upon him to be garrulous anent her.

“Sudden, my dear sir; girls don’t get offers of marriage every day of their lives, and a rich man is not to be sneezed at.”

“Is he so very rich?” Walrond could not have raised his eyes at that moment. A thousand emotions warred within him, but humiliation reigned uppermost, humi-



liation in Bernice's debasement, and the meanness of his own thoughts.

Money, the magic wherewith to win a maiden's heart. Such thoughts were indeed rank treason to the tender, holy love he had felt for her. Not waiting for Borrodaile's reply, he turned abruptly on his heel, leaving the lawyer in ecstasies of delight.





## CHAPTER II.

“Fear attends the steps of wrong.”

**I**N strong contrast with the life he had so lately left, John now found his lines were cast in pleasant places ; looking back, he wondered how he had endured that beggarly garret, poor Bet’s homely companionship, and their scanty fare. It is true that half-torn handbills still lingered on the hoardings offering a price for his capture, but so selfishly light-hearted was John that they failed to remind him with any force of the

worse time that had preceded his garret home, a time so dark and miserable that even that garret had seemed heaven in comparison. His was the sunny, egotistic spirit that forgets past troubles and past favours alike, and I am sorry to say he gave the girl who had toiled for him in his need, only a half-contemptuous, half-pitying remembrance. There are many such, lovable, gentle-mannered, careless creatures, who play a villain's part from sheer want of thought.

It chafed while it satisfied Stephen to see how easily John seemed to step into Bernice's good graces ; there was something about the genial, showy stranger that interested her. A many-sided man was John, and of an essentially sympathetic

nature, and this fresh-hearted country girl with her new thoughts on old subjects, with her large reading and little knowledge, with her pure soul and clean life, brought the best treasures of John's mind uppermost; and a cultivated intellect he certainly possessed. Bernice had seen so little of the great world, while John had proved and sickened of it as one must who has sinned and not prospered, that it was a relief to him finding this girl's companionship so thoroughly intellectual.

"I never met a woman that I liked more and loved less," he said to Stephen one day.

"A very comfortable sentiment towards your future wife," answered his brother, with an ugly smile.

"I am afraid, dear old boy, your plan will fall through. Were I to ask that noble girl to be my wife she would laugh at me, Steve, as surely as my name's John."

"What the devil do you find to talk about," growled Stephen. "You don't spoon, you say, and yet I don't believe in her whole life she ever said as much to me as she says to you in an hour."

"I was always considered fascinating," laughed John.

"If you could only trifle with her, win her love and then desert her," continued Stephen in a tone of intense malice. "It is so easy to play with some women. Why should she be so different to the rest?"

John positively shouted with mirth.

"Play with Miss Bernice's heart, Ste-

phen ! It would take a cleverer and a handsomer man than your humble servant to accomplish that."

"It's not your looks, you fool," said bitter Stephen. "It's your supposed wealth that will win the bride ; women have no love now-a-days, they weigh us by the pound."

"If that were true, Steve, I should be very near heaven. How the scales would go up ! But I beg to differ with you, brother mine ; I fancy Cupid is just as busy now as ever he was in the pastoral age, when there were no theatres, and no clubs to lure pretty pink and white Corydon from coquettish golden-haired Phyllis. We may not be so gushing, but depend upon it, women have not lost the art of loving, bless 'em ! I would stake all I possess—which,

by the way, is not much — that money enters very little into Miss Ghauntly's maiden meditation."

"So she is not quite the kind of woman you would choose for a wife, John?"

"Beggars can't be choosers, Steve. I often feel downright ashamed of myself," and his handsome face flushed, "when I reflect how meanly I am acting towards her."

Stephen raised a little, pinched, white face.

"Well, John?" interrogatively.

John knocked the ash off his cigar very carefully, looking away from his brother; the satire and the malice in the smaller man's eyes was certainly not pleasant to meet. John's conscience smote him, too,

as the spiteful amusement deepened round Stephen's sensitive mouth. Selfish careless John, he could see how evil was the work he had set his hand to, but he had no moral strength to refuse its guerdon. As I have before said, looking back on the poverty he had so lately escaped, he wondered how he had endured its many and monotonous hardships; a sybarite to his heart's core the hope of a life of ease and plenty led him on, drowning each faint remonstrance of his better nature.

It amused Stephen studying this nature that was so thoroughly child-like in its weak yielding to temptation, and utter want of self-control; this nature that was affectionate and gentle from habit; that others generally found so fascinating and lovable;



and that had so easily failed in life's great battle. In Stephen's shrewd eyes, John was a fool, a fool for allowing himself to be led, and doubly a fool for indulging in weak sentiment anent his own wrong-doing.

Regret was a word practically unknown to our little schemer, and I do not think he was altogether led away by vanity when he mentally decided on his own superiority over John, had his general determination and strength of will been turned towards good instead of ill.

"Did you say anything about those shares?" he asked, suddenly, startling John from the reverie into which he had fallen.

"Oh! yes; the old man was cracking them up this morning—sure to pay ten

per cent., he said—I told him, if he really thought it a good investment, I did not mind risking two thousand—fancy me such a capitalist, Steve! I talked big, I assure you.”

“I have no doubt you did, John, that is quite in your line.”

“What a sly old fox he is,” continued John, glad to have a fling at some one. “You say they are worth nothing.”

“Not the paper they are printed on; old Ghauntly knows a thing or two, and if he got two thousand of your money, he would not put it further than the bank safe.”

“Why did you wish me to offer him two thousand pounds, Steve?”

"For many reasons," answered crafty Steve. "I wished him to think you rich in the first place, and then I wanted to get him into your power a bit. You had better say you have heard it is not quite safe, that will startle him; say also you don't think much of the directors; pretend to back out of it."

"Look, Steve!" suddenly exclaimed John. "There's Bill Stone coming up the road; what can he possibly want?"

"Make yourself scarce, John," said Stephen, hurriedly; some idea of *what* Bill Stone could possibly want flashing across his mind; "don't let him see you."

Old Jeal put her head cautiously round the door.

"There's a odd - looking chap wants speech with you, master, shall I let him in? I told him I'd see if you was in here, and I shut the house-door on him while I comed up."

"Show him in, Jeal."

Bill Stone slouched into the little parlour, touching his hat, but not attempting to remove it. He was a tall, powerfully-built man, with a pock-marked, villainous face.

"Well, my friend, what can I do for you?" Stephen said, suavely.

"Wot can you do for me, maister?" mimicked the man, in a slow, guttural voice, "I don't want much of the gentlefolks, I earns my living, I do—all I wants of you is my gal."

“Your girl!” and Stephen opened his eyes.

“Yes, my lass, Bet; it’s no go yer a pretending to burst yer eyes at me, for, yer knows as it was that mealy-faced friend o’ yourn as ’ticed her away—and I says to myself, says I, ‘I’ll find the little gentleman, and make him give her up.’”

“You don’t suppose, Mr Stone, that I have your daughter?”

“If I thought so,” cried the man, bringing his clenched hand down on the table, with a violence that made Stephen start, “I’d break every bone in yer body, by G—d I would! I don’t go for to say,” he added, more gently, “that I’ve been a good father to the lass, but I’ve

got a heart, and I were mad when I heard as she were gone."

"I am very sorry," said Stephen, "that I cannot assist you. I really know nothing of the matter."

"That's a lie!" said Bill Stone doggedly. "That friend o' yourn sent the lass down here for money. Ye must know where he is; 'taint likely as a cove like that as wants to live out o' other folks breeches - pocket would let yer be in ignorance where to find him."

Lawyer Borrodaile felt terribly perplexed; he realised how dangerous Bill Stone might become were his curiosity not satisfied, and how inevitable would be his recognition of John, were he not

speedily sent from Walrond. The man's low face, a face that was all jowl, lit by little, twinkling, half-buried, evil eyes, looked sullen and doggedly determined, capable of any amount of mischief, Stephen decided.

Supposing he were to give Bet's address, the girl would naturally tell her father of the part Stephen had played in John's desertion. Bodily fear was the lawyer's weak point, and if Bill Stone became once convinced that Borrodaile had treated his girl badly, he might take the law into his own hands, and administer chastisement. Had he dared, he would have offered him money but convinced as Stephen was of the power of gold he knew there were times when even

the most debased and avaricious would scorn to accept payment for wrong.

"Now, look yer, maister," said the bargee, growing tired of the silence, "I be a plain-spoken chap, I be, and wot I says I sticks to, and I've made up my mind as I don't leave this yer bit o' a town until yer gives me word where to find that man."

"I did know where to find him," said Stephen, "in fact, I saw him about three months ago."

Bill Stone drew a deep breath, his bloodshot eyes fixed on Stephen,—

"And my little lass, did yer see her?"

"Well, there was a girl in the room."

The other took two quick steps nearer,



laying his hard strong hand on the lawyer's arm.

"No shilly-shallying, man; were it my gal, or were it not?"

"I think it was," cried Borrodaile, shaking off the other's hand. "I'll give you the address," he continued, hurriedly. "I offered him work but we fell out about the terms, so I gave him up, and I have not seen him since." While talking he had been writing on a slip of paper,—*"There is the address."*

The man took it, spelling it over slowly.

"Thank yer kindly, sir," he said, more civilly, turning to leave the room. "I be a rough cove, I be—my dooty to yer,

sir," and with this apology he closed the door on Stephen, who did not breathe freely till he saw the bulky figure slouching down the road.


"What a fool John is!" he muttered;  
"what a confounded fool!"





### CHAPTER III.

"My plots fall short, like darts which rash hands throw  
With careless aim, and have too far to go ;  
Nor can I long discoveries prevent,  
I deal too much among the innocent."

STEPHEN was in anything but  
an enviable frame of mind ; here  
was an obstacle utterly unfore-  
seen and decidedly formidable. That this  
low specimen of humanity would come for-  
ward in the dignified character of an honest  
father, claiming justice or retribution for a  
daughter's wrongs, had never occurred to.

him for a moment; brutish, uneducated, and dishonest, he had fancied Bill a mere tool to be used and flung aside; a creature so utterly insignificant, that he had felt his usual diplomacy unnecessary in addressing him; and now Borrodaile winced as he recalled this want of caution. If it came to open war between these two, the clever, educated schemer, and the rough, unlettered bargee, which would get the best of it? In one quick mental flash, Stephen saw himself unmasked, and he clenched his small nervous hands spasmodically.

In all his evil doings he had worked wide of detection; true there were whispers afloat, suspiciously worded, and attacking our little friend's moral character, but they

began and ended as whispers, the public—in other words, the small cluster of busy, chattering Walrondites—still bowed its head respectfully to the lawyer, and still trusted him with its few knotty legal problems, and although he laughed at and despised the honest townsfolks, he could not in his sensitive pride have endured scorn or contemptuously at their hands. Bill Stone might be terribly dangerous, he knew of John's disgrace (crime had no weight, morally speaking, with Stephen, it was crime's fruition he realised), he knew also of Stephen's anxiety to aid the convict, and if he chose to speak, his rough, unlettered tongue could a tale unfold that would make Walrond decidedly too hot for the lawyer.

He saw now how short-sighted he had

been in not securing the girl as an ally; this might have been accomplished at the expense of a very little kindness, a letter now and then from John posted at some other town, and a small show of anxiety for her comfort on his own side. He had thoroughly overlooked her in his plans, fancying that, separated from John, she need trouble them no more; and he had witnessed with pleasure his brother's speedy forgetfulness of the poor young woman for whom he had once professed so much affection.

What was to be done? even supposing Bet still loved John and still cherished faith in his honour, from very innocence she would betray him to her father, she would say that he, Borrodaile, had come like a thief and stolen her lover, and that

she had not seen him since ; this would be enough to convince Bill that the lawyer had wilfully deceived him, and they might return to Walrond together, the betrayed and the avenger !

What was to be done ? Stephen's busy brain quickly decided one thing, and he put out his lean hand and pulled the bell-cord sharply.

" Ask Mr John to come to me at once."

And old Jeal, nodding, went to find the young man.

" He be in a mortal rage," she said.

" Who — Stephen ?" and John laughed.

" His anger don't matter much, Jeal."

" Don't you go for to cross the master, dearie," and she laid her wrinkled, toil-worn hand on his arm ; " he's bitter bad

when crossed, and he never loved you, Mr John, not even when you was little together. Why, I mind me once—there's his bell again. Don't keep him waiting, and, Mr John, don't go for to speak him rough, whatever he says."

"A pretty fool you are!" was Stephen's greeting.

"My dear Steve, I own the soft impeachment."

"Damn you!" cried the lawyer, starting up in a sudden passion. John's habit of *badinage* was decidedly aggravating at any time, and now the poor little man's brain was on the rack, and he, who was naturally so calm, paced the room in a perfect frenzy. "Here am I!" he cried, throwing out his arms tragically, "who have worked



ever since I can remember, self-denying in all the ordinary pleasures of youth, grudging, toiling, slaving, and for what? To be disgraced by such as you—a sloven, a fool, a beggar!”

“Hard words, Stephen,” said John, good-naturedly; “but, as the poet wisely saith, hard words break no bones.”

Stephen glared; the handsome, animated face, and lazy, graceful length of limb smote him with a sudden sense of hate and envy.

“You have always stood in my path, stealing love and kindness and money from me, and now you would rob me of my social position—my position I have worked for, while you were wasting your youth in debauchery and crime! Deborah Borro-

daile left you her money because you were a pleasant child to look upon ; she hated me, the elder, for no other reason than that I was plain and misshapen. The old fool, who all her youth refused men's love thinking they wanted her money, left it to you to squander and misuse. I began life chained to a desk—a lawyer's copying clerk. You began life in chambers in St James's. A few years pass, and I can count on a modest, honestly-earned competence, while you are a ragged outcast at war with the world, a price set upon your head, and a felon's doom before you !”

John thrust his hands into the pockets of his short shooting - coat ; nothing but gratitude prevented his avenging these

home truths in kind. But, to do him justice, the momentary irritation ended in a swift sense of the justice of Stephen's harangue.

“Very true, but why remind me of these unpleasant facts?” he said, with a return of his old careless *bonhomme*.

“I have been threatened and insulted,” groaned Stephen, throwing himself into the arm-chair. “Through your folly, I see before me disgrace and poverty. Why must you have made love to the first coarse-faced wench you met, and put me into the power of that scoundrel Stone?”

“What did he want—money?”

“The fool wanted his daughter.”

“Well, he can have her, Steve, and welcome. What a load off my con-

science!" and John, the faithless, laughed. "And you are really raising this storm in a tea-cup because Mr Stone possesses paternal affection!"

Stephen turned his haggard face impatiently towards his brother.

"Can you never look beyond the moment, John? Don't you see, when Bet tells her father of your desertion, the brute will be down here again, trying to find you, and avenge your treatment of her?"

John laughed, loudly.

"My dear old fellow, now you are terrifying yourself with a parcel of romantic nonsense. Seriously, Steve, you can't be well; let Jeal compound one of her nice cooling draughts for you. Bill Stone and vengeance! Ah, ah! The old drunkard

would sell his soul for a quartern of gin.  
Let him find me, but—

‘Spare my grief and apprehend  
What I should speak.’”

“And you really think his real motive was to extort money?” said Stephen. John’s contempt for his anxiety was beginning to have effect, and he felt somewhat ashamed of the passion he had so lately exhibited.

“He may have imbibed a sufficient quantity of beer on the road here to make him forget for the moment his original intention. I believe country ale has a tendency towards virtuous sentiment; but depend upon it, old man, he has already found out his mistake, and

you will have him back again trying to extort cash.

"Heaven forbid!" cried Stephen hastily, with a vivid recollection of Bill Stone's threat.

"He seems to have succeeded in frightening you, *mon frère*, I did not know you were so easily bowled over," and John's fine eyes lit up with contempt. "What did the bogey say?"

"He swore he would not leave the village until he had found my mealy-faced friend, meaning you."

John whistled.

"That would have been decidedly unpleasant, *eh, après?*"

"I gave him the girl's address."

"What! Bet's?"

"Yes, it was the only way of pacifying him."

It was now John's turn to look grave.

"Was that wise, Steve?"

"What could I do?" growled the other angrily. "Would you have let him stop in this scandal-loving little hole, telling his story to a dozen listeners in every cottage. Your freedom would not have been worth a moment's purchase with such an enemy in Walrond."

"What shall we do, Stephen?" A wild anxiety suddenly banished the merriment that usually shone in John's blue eyes; he realised now the horror he had escaped; the terrible hulks rose up before him, grim, pitiless, and naked. "In the fiend's name, Steve, what shall we do?"

"My plan is that you go to London

by the five o'clock express to-night," said Stephen eagerly; "and when Bill Stone comes be there to laugh at him, tell him you have married the girl—anything you like — his finding you there will prevent his coming down here again. When you have put him off the scent you can take her to other lodgings, and return to Walrond."

"That all sounds very flourishing, Steve, but Bet herself — how shall I account for this long silence? She has a fine spirit of her own and will most likely turn the tables on me— Confound it all!" added the young man, with sudden irritation, "how am I to face the girl?"

"Advice on that point is out of my



power," said Stephen, with an ugly sneer; "I have never gone in for lady-killing. One Don Giovanni is enough in a family, I think."

"She did care for me," mused John, his careless face softening; "and I treated her like a brute."

"I believe, John, you are a tolerably well-read man. Can you not recall some such case from the realms of fiction where a faithless swain returns to his slighted love; surely romance abounds in situations so thrilling. You might plagiarize from the hero's most pathetic speeches."

John laughed.

"Fellows in books always come off all right. Ulysses stopped away from Penelope ever so many years, and then came

home with a cock-and-bull story about an enchanted island."

"In these unsentimental days," said Stephen dryly, "brain fever might answer the purpose instead of a witch-island, if you are careful that fair Calypso's name never escapes your lips by mistake—say you have just recovered from an attack of brain fever, brought on by overwork and anxiety."

"I look like it," said John, rising and peering into the mirror; his handsome, ruddy face certainly reflected no trace of recent illness. "Suppose I meet Stone at the station, Stephen; he might recognise me in spite of this disguise?"

"I don't think he would; besides he will most likely tramp to London; if

he goes by train he will have to wait till to-morrow morning, the five o'clock express has no third class; so you have a good start anyway."

"I will go and put up a few things—I was to have dined at old Ghauntly's to-day."

"Then just look in, and excuse yourself to Miss Ghauntly—business of importance calls you away, and all that sort of thing."

Stephen took two five - pound notes from his pocket.

"That is all I can spare you, John, so make the most of it—when you are married you can pay me back."

"Ah, when!" sighed John, as he left the house.

Bernice was sitting in a low arm-chair drawn up close to the fire, some needle-work half dropping from her listless hands ; she started up with a little blush when John entered the room unannounced, he had tapped on the door and she supposed it was Hannah.

“Going to London, Mr St Clare ; oh ! how I envy you.”

“And you have never been,” said John, drawing his chair quite close to hers ; “how I envy *you*, Miss Bernice.”

“Why ?” she asked, laughing.

“Because of the treat you have in store—how you will enjoy your first visit—Aladin’s palace was tame compared to the wonders of London.”

“How long will you be away ?” she asked.

"Only two days; but they will seem quite long to me."

Bernice smiled, she was no flirt, but of course she understood John's insinuation.

"I am sorry for you, Mr St Clare, if you could possibly find two days long passed in a city of wonders," she said, demurely.

Many men would have taken this as encouragement, but some inner consciousness whispered to John that were he to put his hopes to the test, and boldly ask the girl to be his wife, she would refuse. "I will wait a little longer," he said to himself; "Stephen's motto, 'Everything comes to him who knows how to wait,' is perhaps the wisest one could adopt. But then, you see, Miss Bernice, the

wonders have ceased to be marvellous in my eyes," he answered, with the air of a worn-out worldling; an assumption, that, taken with his handsome young person, had a certain attraction for an innocent romantic girl like Bernice.

"The very sight of crowds of strange faces must be a curious study, Mr St Clare, to know that each life has its story, its past, present and future."

"Such a study makes an atheist, Miss Bernice."

"An atheist?" turning her dark, sensible eyes full upon him in questioning astonishment.

"Yes; that very multiplication of life robs it of divinity." John was fond of dipping into metaphysics with Bernice;

he liked to see her fair face shadow with thought. "How can a reflecting mind credit all these millions of common-place creatures with an endless eternity? Why garner up so much mediocrity?"

"But each life is so distinct a thing," said the girl quickly; woman-like not thinking out the subject and yet striking the key-note of an excellent counter argument.

"Yes, but when you think how thickly the world is peopled, and that each human being has an influence on other human beings for good or for ill, you see that, alone, would bring an endless variety into each life, and prevent monotony."

Bernice looked scarcely convinced—indeed John loved hearing his own tongue, and like most talkers left much to the intelligence or imagination of his listeners.

“Well, I must run away,” he cried, starting up. “Is there nothing I can do for you, no little commission you will entrust me with?”

“You are very good, but I will not trouble you; there would be a trade indignation meeting here if I were to send to London for anything,” and she held out her fair white hand.

“Good-bye for the present,” John said, pressing it warmly; “kind remembrances to your father.”

Bernice stood at the window watching him go; our innocent, egotistic girl grieved



a little over him, as a young man to whom millions of human beings could only preach atheism.

“Am I fit for respectability?” said the young fellow to himself, “had I not better stay away when I am once more in London—stay in town and try somehow or other to pick up a living.” Bernice always made John dissatisfied with himself. “But hang it all,” he continued, walking fast in his irritation, “a man does not want to pass his life with a woman he feels his superior.” Then his mood changed. “How foolish to give up the solid advantages of life because a slip of a girl held her pretty head rather high. A wife’s duty,” he argued, “lay in studying her husband’s comfort, in looking up to him,

and giving him any amount of hero-worship." John found he was gradually getting on better terms with himself,

"She is a woman, therefore to be won,"

he hummed.

It was all very well to talk of earning his living, he had tried that little game before and found it poor play—earning one's living meant hard work and scanty fare.

"'Pon my soul," he said, becoming quite indulgent towards himself, "I am a good-hearted fellow, I actually pine to save Miss Ghauntly from an unsatisfactory marriage at the expense of my own comfort, but I must not allow J. Borrodaile to be Quixotic. Of course I will study her happiness in

every possible way"—he meant it, when he said it,—“and as for poor little Bet, I shall put her to school for a year or two, and then see how I can best start her in life.”





## CHAPTER IV.

‘Surprise has this effect to make one dumb—  
Yet leaves the gate which eloquence slips through  
As wide as if long speech were to come.”

**W**HEN John mounted the little rickety flight of steps that led to his once garret home, an intense disgust thrilled his whole being; to what horrible dens had poverty led him. Bernice embodied gold, beautiful as a priestess of that powerful deity should be. Bernice! his heart bowed down and worshipped her.

"I must make short work of Bet," he muttered, pushing open the unfastened door. Neat and clean, but bare and poverty-branded ; his scornful eyes, glancing round the little room, contracted and darkened till they almost grew like Stephen's in their mean contempt.

He realised how superior he was to the girl who had loved and slaved for him ; he a man of education and refinement to have thought for a moment of linking his fate with such a woman as Bet. Poverty is so demoralising ; all the luxury and the comfort of the stately mansions and piquant villas wherein he had lately been so welcome, was round him like a spell ; the glittering ornaments, the inviting lounges, the soft-footed

menials, the dainty *châtelaines*. Ah! those women, the women of *his* world, and Bet! Well, he could laugh at himself now, and in a manner that would certainly have gratified Stephen had that arch-tempter been by to hear.

"Stephen is a real good fellow, and no mistake," he said to himself; "fancy his having the patience to argue with a man enamoured of this beastly, stifling little hole."

And John stood in the doorway, too fine a gentleman now even to sit down, though no speck of dust lay on the one chair the room contained.

That poor little room, almost pathetic in its homely inartistic arrangement; showing also a womanly careful neatness,

and cleanliness that had never been taught the girl, for on board the "Little Queen," cleanliness and neatness would have been an impossibility. There was a play-bill nailed up over the narrow mantelshelf; John walked over and looked at it, and a little exclamation escaped him at the sight of Bet's name in the programme. While he had been playing his dishonourable *rôle* at Walrond, this poor girl had been honestly working, and gaining for herself a position that was full of incipient glory in the stage world, however trivial it might seem to outsiders. The pleasure of work had never been John's; Deborah Borrodaile in leaving him that hardly-hoarded little fortune, had thought to save her golden-

haired darling from all the ills of life ; instead, she had laid out for him a thorny path of many evils ; all the temptation and the *ennui* of idleness had found ready entrance into the young man's empty life ; and having sown in folly he had reaped in bitterness.

But, John's character having very little depth, the anguish of that reaping did not abide with him long. To some men it would have been a terrible lesson, colouring their whole future life, but he was content to drift through existence, finding his level of comfort in every position, from the highest to the lowest. In this garret he had not been unhappy ; indeed, a certain content had come to him there, and a certain purity, born of



the honesty of his intentions at the time ; then he had fully meant to make Bet his wife, and meaning to do well had been a happiness in itself. The girl's deep, honest love had saved their life from coarseness ; and it had been perhaps better for John if no other good had come to him than this true woman's affection, and a helping hand that had just put honest work into his own.

But as it was, he would marry a lady, a great heiress, and become an influential member of society—an autocrat in Walrond, looked up to and worshipped by the simple peasantry—he would buy him a fine estate, and fill his stables with expensive cattle, and he would be clad daintily, and fare sumptuously every day.

of his life. The past, like a sealed book, would lie somewhere among the débris of forgetfulness; and with that past must be this last folly that involved him with a miserable little minor actress. Even her new position, which startled him in its success, *his* world would fling at her as a term of reproach. Most young men were fools, but he had been an exceptional fool; he owned that to himself with an angry kick at the fenderless grate—a kick that brought the poker down, from its graceful recline against the fireplace, with a startling crash.

Simultaneously with the fall of the poker there came a cry, faint at first but speedily prolonged into an ear-splitting peevish wail. John started and looked round him

in utter bewilderment; lying on the bed, with little red fists clenched and impotently beating the air, was *a baby*, could he believe his eyes, a baby! He went up close to the bed and looked at it, at the puckered angry little face and small bald head. It was not in human nature to listen calmly to such shrieks of woe as this crafty baby now uttered; John threw his hat on the table and gathered the baby up in his arms, blanket and all, walking up and down the room rocking it as he had seen mothers soothe their infants.

The plan certainly answered, for baby at once ceased to shriek, and gradually growing less apoplectic-looking lay as "good as gold," sucking its thumb, and blinking solemnly up at him.

"There's a dear ducky-ducky," said John, laughing in triumph and gently tossing baby.

Baby crowed and laughed, and little dimples came all over its youthful countenance.

It is astonishing what a past-master John suddenly found himself in that fond, foolish language babies understand. He would not have had Stephen see him for the world, but to tell the truth he had forgotten Stephen, and was finding his little friend decidedly entertaining ; and so Bet found them chatting away as if they had known each other all their lives. John, his voice even altered into a soft half-whisper, uttering words that set Lindley Murray at defiance, and certainly never

occur in Johnson's dictionary ; and baby answering in little sounds expressive of content and appreciation.

"Wot, lad, is it thee?" cried the girl, coming quickly and lightly into the room.

He went towards her, the baby in one arm, and, passing the other round her, kissed her. "Why, my little Bet, how you've altered."

She had in truth altered, there was a dignity, a refinement about her, and the sensible, comely face, aglow now with delight, was very pleasant to look upon.

"And you've made friends with the wee bit lassie," she said, taking the child from him, "the little lass that is three months old afore she sees her father."

John started, he had not realised before that this was his own child; started guiltily remembering the errand on which he had come.

“I should have returned sooner had I been able, you know, my dear,” he said, feeling very small and sneakish.

“Ay, I know, lad, I ne’er doubted thee;” she was unwinding the heavy blanket from baby’s little white-robed person; engrossed in her child, the pleasure and surprise of seeing John did not make her forgetful of its comforts. And this was the girl he had thought of sending to school, this woman clothed in all the conscious dignity of motherhood.

“And you have got your name down on the programme, Bet!”

Her face lit up, a half-comical, half-shy smile, and withal a saucy smile.

“That puzzles thee, lad, may-be—well it just came about this way. One day I was busy tidying this wee bit room, and singing to mysen the while, when up comes the lady as lives in the big rooms—the drawing-rooms they call them—and she says,—‘We’ve been listening to you, my dear, father and I,—you’ve got a fine voice.’ Only fancy that, lad, and you never found it out!”

“I always thought your voice very sweet, dear.”

“Well, and a day or so after, the old gentleman, he says,—‘Would you like some lessons in singing?’ and thinking mayhap the lad will be pleased, I just

worked hard every day; and then Mr Herman asked the stage manager to hear me sing. Mr Herman, ye know, plays the violen o' nights, and Miss Dolly they call singing - chambermaid. Well, these two, they just talked the governor into giving me a try, and he gave me two lines to say, and when Jennie Fisher left they gave me her part, with a song, that I had to learn word by word, though it's English too—"

"And you really sing Jennie Fisher's song!" cried John, with a vivid recollection of that young lady's "go" as a patter-song artist.

"Ay, lad, as a fine young gentleman dressed in violet velvet."

"Wonders will never cease," said John.

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“Can you sing me the song, Bet? I should like to hear it.”

She laid her small burden down on the bed, and standing before him, debonair and saucy, a very burlesque prince, sang her song in a clear sweet voice; a brightness and a keen sense of fun making her face perfectly charming. He was astonished, the artistically marked points, the appropriate actions, the expression of her mobile face, all showed the woman who had found her vocation—all showed talent of its kind, and of no mean order. Miss Fisher had been somewhat vulgar and coarse, somewhat loud of voice and extravagant of gesture, but Bet was neither one nor the other; her only fault, if fault it were, lay in a modest diffidence,

that now and then seemed to peep through the gay brilliancy of her song, showing, at least to John, an anxiety for approval.

“It would be a hard-hearted god who could hiss you,” he said, drawing her to his side.

She raised her face, full of the perfect content a woman feels when praised by the one she loves. “That song gets an encore every night, lad! it’s a pretty song and a merry one. And wot have you been doing yourself?” she continued, taking his hand in both her own.

John hesitated, his better nature struggling bravely with the veneer of craft and dishonesty Stephen had laboured so hard to bestow upon him. It seemed such an unmanly act trying

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to deceive this true - hearted young woman.

“My darling,” he cried. “What do you wish me to do, now that I have returned?”

She raised her eyes, bewildered and pained those dark eyes looked, but they were brave eyes pleading for the truthful reading of his words.

“You shall judge me,” he said, impulsively; and then he told her the whole story, he did not spare himself, he spoke of his own meanness both towards her and Bernice; he told the story wildly, and in many words, and then he stood before her with bowed head, yet feeling relieved with a characteristically selfish sense of having shifted the burden off his own shoulders on to Bet’s.

Poor Bet, all her ignorant loving heart longing for this worthless young man's happiness, realised how the future he had pictured was fitting for him, and she placed her hand upon her heart as though to still its pain.

"I have made you unhappy, dear Bet," John said. "My darling, when I am married, I can give you plenty of money, and always care for you and the child."

"Nay, lad, we don't want your bits o' brass," she said, and her lips trembled. "See here," and she crossed the room, and taking a little basin from the cupboard emptied the contents, several sovereigns, into her hand. "See here, man, I saved them for ye, thinking maybe ye might

not come back successful." She dropped them back into the basin one by one. "Me and the little lass will get on very well, ye'll find.'

"Bet, Bet, forgive me," he cried, catching her hand.

"I can so," she said, "in time."

When John left her he felt small and mean, and utterly contemptible, laying the blame on fate, on Stephen, and even on Bet.

Poor Bet, all her pride deserting her as he left the house, threw herself down by the little child's side, sobbing bitterly and hopelessly.

"I ne'er tell on the lad when father comes," she said, bravely, and then she clenched her small brown hands. "No

he's been none too good to me, but I'll stand by him. Oh! laddie, laddie, the fine lady maybe'll love ye, but not as I do! not as I do!"





## CHAPTER V.

“ Oh ! woe is me,  
To have seen, what I have seen ! ”

**B**ERNICE is sitting by the window, finishing, by the waning light, a little water-coloured drawing she began more than a year ago ; it is a pretty trifle, a clumsy barge being towed down a sun-kissed river, that winds among yellow cornfields bright here and there with a flame of scarlet poppies. The little picture is strangely in contrast with the view from

Bernice's window, for the snow is falling among the skeleton trees, soft, white feather-like flakes, and the gravel paths are frozen and slippery. The snow has kept Miss Bernice indoors, so in search of employment she found this neglected little sketch.

There is a woman seated in the stern, a woman recognisable only as a small patch of colour; had anyone told her that this woman was in any way connected with her own calm, uneventful life how incredulously she would have opened those soft eyes of hers.

She raised her head with a little exclamation as her father entered the room.

"Why, papa, how early you are to-day!"

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"Yes, child," he said, drawing an arm-chair close to the fire; "there, don't tease me, my good girl," and he sat down turning his back on Bernice.

Old Ghauntly had just come from a rather trying interview with Anthony St Clare. Anthony St Clare, *alias* John Borrodaile, had spoken very plainly about the bank shares, declining to have anything to do with them.

The idea of starting the company had originated with Lawyer Borrodaile and some clever cronies of his. One of the directors of the company owned a small piece of land in America, and the company was formed to pay the expenses of striking oil there. Mr Ghauntly was quite duped at first by the glowing accounts he received, but lately he had

found out that the oil yielded scarcely paid the mere labour. So far Mr Ghauntly had acted honourably, but having heard this bad news he kept it to himself, wishing to get rid of the shares he had previously bought and still possessed. Borro-daile having impressed upon him that not being one of the directors of the company, he was in no way responsible for their insolvency ; and then there was a chance, a very slight one certainly, but still a chance of the shares becoming valuable.

It startled him terribly when Mr St Clare, in the most airy manner possible, called the company a swindle. Poor old Ghauntly almost had a fit.

"I should realise if I were you, I should indeed," said the young man confidentially.

"The office will close next week," he continued; "it is only kept on now as a blind."

"God bless my soul, sir," cried the banker, "many families will be ruined!"

Mr St Clare shrugged his broad shoulders; clearly families ruined, many or few, was no business of his.

"May I ask how you obtained this startling news, Mr St Clare?"

Mr Anthony laughed, turning his handsome insolent face full on the other.

"Is it possible, Mr Ghauntly, that this is news to you?"

"Certainly, sir; do you doubt it?" asked the banker, trying to be indignant, but only succeeding in looking nervously anxious.

The young man became suddenly intensely interested in a fine pearl ring he wore on his little finger, whistling softly to himself. Lawyer Borrodaile's parting instructions had been—"Be insolent, nothing so crows a man, who feels himself in your power, as a little rudeness."

"I repeat, sir, do you doubt it?" cried old Ghauntly, purple with passion.

"I should realise were I you," and Anthony turned away, an almost irresistible impulse to laugh coming strongly upon him, old Ghauntly's piping voice and frenzied face being comical to a degree.

"How can I do that, if, as you say, the office is only kept open as a blind?" wailed the old man.

Anthony St Clare drew his chair nearer to Mr Ghauntly.

“Now, I’ll give you my advice, he said, with an air of pleasant cordiality. “This is an infernal bad business, and you, my dear sir, are in a deuce of a hole (Mr Ghauntly winced). In your place, I should just return the money of the shares you have sold. I would not be responsible for the company another hour.”

“What! sir? You actually advise me to shield this swindle with my own private purse?”

“The affair must come to a standstill,” continued the young man, not noticing the interruption, “and liquidation will follow. The best thing you can do is to return the shareholders’ money, and so save your name.”

“And what the devil is my name to you, sir?” cried Mr Ghauntly.”

“Pardon me, Mr Ghauntly, when I say your good name is something to me,” said Anthony with enough condescension for a young prince.

“In what way, sir?” fumed the old man.

“In every way, for I aspire to the honour of being your son-in-law,” came the soft answer.

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“So there is to be a wedding at Walrond Chace,” said Mr Ghauntly suddenly.

Bernice turned round, she had been looking out on the gloaming, it had become too dark for her work.

“Colonel Walrond going to be married, papa?”

“Don’t be a gaby, Bernice. Colonel Walrond marry at his age?”

“Why, papa, only a few days ago you were saying that he ought to marry again—quite a youngish man you called him,” and the girl laughed.

“Did I?” Mr Ghauntly was standing with his back to the fire, and he began pacing up and down the room. “Only a few days ago” he had thought of Walrond as a possible son-in-law, but now—and the old diplomatist began comparing our blameless Lancelot with that debonair prince Charming, Anthony St Clare. Anthony St Clare with his large fortune, his youth and his good looks, far outweighed

Colonel Walrond's sober claims, and was in every way a fitter mate for his beautiful darling.

"Yes," continued Bernice, woman-like pursuing her advantage, "you said so, dear, over and over again." She slipped her hand through his arm, and they paced the room together, a bowed, awkward old man, and a fair stately woman, all the soft lines of face and form contrasting with his uncomely age.

"Well, child, you shall decide," said her father, smiling; it was pleasant to feel the caressing weight of that little hand on his arm, and he covered it with his long lean fingers in a pressure of affection; "tell me now, when is a man too old to marry?"



"You called Colonel Walrond a youngish man, papa;" and there was a saucy light in those dark eyes, eyes that were not often saucy.

"Why are you advocating Colonel Walrond's marrying?" old Ghauntly asked, suspiciously.

"You have not yet told me who is going to be married?" Bernice questioned, evasively.

"Lord Elmsden and Marjory Walrond."

"Really, papa, she seems such a child, too."

"You have yourself to thank," said the banker, with sudden irritation, "that you are not in her place—the *fiancée* of a man of title—you let him slip through your fingers."

"Let him slip through my fingers, papa!"

"Why do you repeat my words? You know you let him slip through your fingers. You might have been Lady Elmsden long ago, had you given him the smallest encouragement."

"I don't understand you in the least, papa."

This conversation was a new thing to the girl, and she resented it, humbly, it is true, but with dignity.

"I have no patience with you," her father continued, lashing himself into inconsistent wrath. "Every girl has a right to establish herself well in life, and you chill any man who seems at all warm towards you."

Bernice's soft proud mouth trembled.

She was not a crying woman, but she felt strangely inclined to burst into a passion of tears. Our dear girl was so satisfied with herself, it was years since anyone had found fault with her and it seemed cruel to do so now.

As she stood in the fire's glow, toying with the charms on her watch-chain, it struck old Ghauntly with a sense of remorse that he had wounded her, and that hard, caustic, worldly words of greed and advancement must sound strangely out of place to her ears. It irritated him, too, that this dainty, gracious, woman thing should possess a pride far beyond his understanding. His pride—a pride born of the homage men gave to his wealth—he would have liked to see reflected in his only child.

He was a hard, avaricious old man, and the sensitive pride of an honourable, unworldly mind annoyed while it humiliated him.

"If anyone asked you in marriage, would you say yes, Bernice?" he asked, more gently.

"Not anyone, surely, papa."

There are times when we make haste to laugh lest we should weep, and Bernice laughed now, a little burst of borrowed mirth like the sparkle in a paste jewel.

"Why are you so flippant to-night, Bernice? Mr St Clare, for instance, would you marry him?" and he looked eagerly into his daughter's beautiful face.

"I know so little of him, papa—" then very gravely. "No, I do not think I would marry Mr St Clare."

“He is young, rich, and good-looking.”

“Surely, papa, dear, love is needful, and I am sure he does not love me.”

“But he does, Bernice ; only to-day he asked my permission to woo you—a very honourable, pleasant-spoken young man, my dear—”

“And what did you say ?” Bernice asked, quickly.

“I gave him my hand, dear, and told him that I should be happy to receive him as a son.”

“Oh ! papa, surely you might have spoken to me first,” and there was a world of pained reproach in her face and in her voice.

“He is going to bank fifteen thousand with us, you will not refuse him ?” and

Bernice looking into that hard old face wondered at the greed of eye and mouth.

There was something pathetic too in the old man's tremulous manner, and it struck Bernice with sudden anxiety. His late interview with Anthony St Clare, and the excitement of speaking unkindly to his cherished child, was telling on him painfully.

"Are you anxious to be rid of me, darling?" she said, pushing him gently into the arm-chair, and kneeling by his side.

"Not anxious to be rid of you, Bernice, not anxious to be rid of you, heaven knows—only anxious to leave you well cared for. I am a very old man, my dear, and I sometimes think I could not rest in my grave if I left you—" he stopped in sudden con-

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fusion. "I should like to see you married."

Bernice laughed, jumping up.

"Is that all, dear? To tell you a secret, papa, I don't think marriage the one thing needful, and I am perfectly happy with you in this dear little cottage."

"But you must get married, child."

"Not just yet, papa—the prospect at present is very vague—no one has asked me, and it is not leap-year." Bernice made a little mocking curtsy most charmingly.

"And you will not accept Mr St Clare?"

There is a menacing ring in old Ghauntly's voice that chills the smile on her red lips.

"You wish me to accept him?" she asks, the light all dying out of her fair face.

“My dear child,” and he draws her listless hand again through his arm. “You could not please me better than by accepting Anthony St Clare. I don’t mind confessing to you that the fifteen thousand will help me immensely just now—ready money is always useful, and so much cash is out at heavy interest. I have had losses too.”

“I know nothing of business,” the girl says, wearily, sick at heart and longing to be alone. In her pride she has made a sudden resolve—if her father is tired of her she will marry to please him, she owes him that much for all those years of care. Most women marry, love may after all be a fabled thing. She has no time to reason further, she feels jaded and pained, and cries out in her bitter hurt,—“If it will

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really please and help you, I will marry Anthony St Clare."

"My dearest child," old Ghauntly says, with so much genuine warmth and satisfaction, that Bernice looks at him in amazement, this father who has always seemed to love her, and who is yet overjoyed at having sold her into loveless bondage for fifteen thousand pounds.

Fifteen thousand little yellow coins, and that is all she is worth ; heart and soul and bodily beauty all waiting for the highest bidder ! Money, how she has always hated the word, a poisonous serpent coiled in the world's fair garden ; eating up nature step by step, crushing the earth's soft bosom with hard stone cities ; coiling round man's heart until it is but a lazar house

of evil desire and through the foul haze no smile of God can penetrate.

Our poor, proud, young heroine—surely even Borrodaile would feel satisfied could he see her thus debased ; thus orphaned, for where in all the wide world can she find the father she once loved and believed in, clothing and hiding his meanness with the nobility of her own white soul. Bankrupt in faith, love and hope, all the romance of her life lies withered round her, like autumn leaves in a rayless sun.





## CHAPTER VI.

"Let dowdies simper, and let bumpkins stare,  
The strolling pageant hero treads on air."

**T**HE house where Bet lived was a perfect beehive, and very few drones were there; from the garrets downwards it would puzzle me to enumerate the different toils and professions each room represented. A shabby exile from sunny France inhabited the front parlour, and a dingy card hung all the year round in the dingy window, announcing that Mons. Mûrat, linguist, gave

instruction at the modest rate of sixpence an hour ; and above Mons. Mûrat's freckled little card hung another still more forlorn-looking piece of information—"Mangling done here." In case you may for a moment fancy that the linguist varied instruction with any such plebeian occupation, I hasten to explain that the second advertisement referred to a lone widow who resided in the back parlour. Miss Dolly Herman and her father inhabited the drawing-room, as they called it—the other lodgers always spoke of them as "the second-floorers"—thus the lone widow was always alluded to as the "first-floor-back," and the natives, if speaking to a stranger, generally explained thus "which is Mrs Grumphus."

Mr Herman, or Dr Herman, as he was

generally called, it being supposed that he had taken musical honours at some remote period ; but they had done him so little permanent good, however, that he now seemed content with the humble position of second violin in the Athenæum orchestra. That his disappointments in life had not soured him is shown by his kindness to Bet, whom he assisted into a position of some little importance in the theatrical world ; for managers however strictly they may keep out mediocrity from their charmed circle, unless assisted by the wizard gold, are never blind to real talent, and this our poor untaught Bet possessed in a remarkable degree.

Miss Dolly Herman was no theatrical luminary, as you might easily have seen had

you studied the flaming posters outside the "Athenæum." Very low down in the list, and in very minute letters, appeared "Miss Dolly Herman;" quite mean it looked in comparison with the star's name, which filled the space of a dozen Miss Dollies, in such black letters too, that the most short-sighted of old city gentlemen who ever took bus city-ward could not fail to be struck by it as he passed; and yet this lucky creature had not been on the stage as many months as Dolly could number years!

Almost her first recollections were of being strapped to an iron bar and lifted aloft up to the flies of old Drury, glittering with spangles, and surrounded by a blaze of crimson light, that happy little

children home from the holidays might clap their hands ; and, later on when their mothers had tucked them snugly up in bed, they would dream of cold, weary, little Dolly ; but in their dreams there would come a transformed Dolly, no vision of a meagre supper and a cheerless garret disturbed their ideas of fairyland.

Miss Dolly Herman had done most things ; she had danced in innumerable ballets ; she had sung at the music halls ; she had tried low-comedy, high-comedy, drama, vaudeville, burlesque, and, on one memorable occasion, she had even essayed Shakespeare ; indeed, at that time, ambition whispered bright hopes for the future, and her success in the *rôle* of Juliet, before an audience so very select that she might

easily have counted it, peeping through a hole in the drop scene, while the weak orchestra squeaked a dreary prelude, quite convinced her that she was an embryo Siddons.

But it is one thing to feel sure of our own genius, and quite another affair forcing the brazen tongue of Fame to own it. Our *ci-devant* Juliet soon became convinced that the legitimate drama was not her line of business; she now styles herself "singing chamber-maid," and it is astonishing what a hydra-headed creature a singing chamber-maid is! She may one night be a cheeky page-boy, or a golden-haired prince, with a wasp-like waist and wonderfully agile legs; sometimes she is a comic old woman, and another night a jolly little jack-tar;



she is also great at farce acting, and has been known at a push to take the part of Topsy in "Uncle Tom's Cabin." In short, one need never be astonished at anything a singing chamber-maid does professionally, for she is one of the most useful and at the same time the worst paid of "principals

"It is novelty that pays," as Mr Goshine, the manager, said; "useful people one must have, but it is something out of the common that pulls in the coin."

And he ought to have known, for he had been experimenting in novelty, and pulling in the coin for sixteen years with more or less success, and let it here be stated to his credit that he had given satisfaction to several Jews, an eminent stockbroker, and

had not openly failed even when chartered by the most empty-headed of England's peerage.

But Miss Dolly was far from possessing that wonderful gift—there was nothing novel about her ; to be useful was her *rôle*—a little neatly-made creature, with a face looking fair enough under a mask of powder and rouge ; eyes that shone like jewels, when carefully blackened ; and a wide mouth, full of really good teeth. A “star” might have possessed no more attractive exterior, but—and here I bow humbly to those fortunate beings, and confess I do not understand their mysterious power—I feel convinced that “stars,” like poets, are born, not made.

But Miss Dolly would have told you

quite another tale ; that young lady, when expatiating on her own disappointments, was wont to say that a star's fame was merely a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence ; and she would even go so far as to assert that be-puffed mediocrity would gain the day running side by side with a Mrs Siddons, unaided save by her own genius.

But although Miss Dolly loved nothing so well as pouring her troubles into a sympathetic ear, she did not allow them in any way to shadow her life ; she was a bright, busy, little girl ; a thorough-paced naturalist, taking life as it came, without much sentimental questioning ; indeed, in her little heart, which glowed at the thought of a few lines

being added to one of her patter-songs, or an extra *pas-seul* finding its way into her part, there was not much room for sentiment of any kind.

In her Bet found a warm friend, this young lady having taken upon herself the character of good Samaritan was satisfied with no lukewarm rendering of the part, she took Bet and the baby thoroughly under her protection; it is true that Bet paid her in kind, tidying the drawing-room, and performing all those little domestic offices that make a home neat and comfortable; of course, such obscure occupation being naturally despised by so clever a person as Miss Dolly.

It was a curious chamber, Miss Dolly's

first-floor front ; a large room with panelled walls and a dingy ceiling, supposed to be painted, but now so begrimed with smoke and age as to represent a November sky in a fog ; under its pristine glories, perhaps, powdered beauties had flirted, and gay gallants had wooed, but now it looked sulkily down on Miss Dolly's little wooden bedstead, on many chairs covered with a motley collection of finery, on a large framed picture of Miss Dolly's mamma, in the character of Rosalinde, leaning against a very green tree, in a pair of very pink tights, giving one the idea of a pretty woman in spite of the two red daubs the artist had considered it necessary to lay on either cheek. Old Mr Herman was very proud of this work of art, and re-

garded it as quite a gem, and he never tired of saying how lovely his wife had been, and how clever she was. Mrs Herman was known to be very erratic in her movements; when she returned to the bosom of her family she seldom stayed long, a fact which gave unbounded satisfaction to Miss Dolly, with whom her pretty, clever, satirical mamma was no great favourite. It was said in the theatre that Mrs Herman only came home when she found her exchequer getting low, and that she left again as soon as she conveniently could; and that she scarcely ever took the trouble to acquaint her husband with her whereabouts, he generally finding some clue through the medium of the *Era*, and other theatrical papers;

be this as it may, Dr Herman always spoke of his wife with tenderness, and when questioned by the curious as to why she did not stop with him, and take a London engagement, he would say that she could not get a good enough engagement in town, and that her talent was above the paltry parts offered her by metropolitan managers, while in the provinces she was well known and appreciated ; which plausible excuse in no wise silenced the busy-bodies.

On the occasion of one of her rare visits Bet encountered this lady ; she came rustling into the room, a vision of silk, lace, jewels, and paint, and seemed vexed at finding a stranger there.

“ Who are you ? ” she asked, sharply.

“An you please, marm, I am Bet,” said the girl simply.

The lady turned sharply round and faced the girl, with her painted eyebrows drawn closely together.

“So you are Bet !” and then she laughed, a low musical laugh of satirical amusement ; “what a little world this is after all—so you are Bet !”







## CHAPTER VII.

"Something of a cold disgust  
Wonderful and most unjust."

**P**LODDING on his weary way to London, Bill Stone came to one resolution, that he would ask Bet no questions. "Wenches weren't to be trusted," he decided; he would judge for himself, and if the lawyer had deceived him—if he had! the bargee would finish the sentence with his brawny arm raised and his small eyes flashing dangerously. Having thus made up his mind, he toiled

on contentedly enough through the mud and the slush, through the rain and the snow, sleeping sometimes in a barn or an empty cart, buying frugal meals in the villages through which he passed, but never growing weary of the journey, never turning from his fixed determination to find Bet, and, if need be, avenge her.

It was the day after Christmas Day when he reached London ; here and there in the slippery streets he came upon some party of holiday-makers, strangely at variance with himself in his tattered travel-stained garments, and with his sullen unkept face. He carried the paper Lawyer Borrodaile had given him, crushed in his hand, and after some difficulty found out the street directed ; a woman was standing in the door-

way calling loudly to a little boy, an invitation he seemed loth to accept.

"Maybe ye can tell me if a lass lives here wot they call Bet?" said the bargee, addressing himself to her.

"Bet?" said the woman, peering at him in the gloom; "why that must be the play-girl—there is a young woman, as they calls Bet, what lives in the top-floor back."

"Thank ye—" and he hesitated; "could you tell me, mum, if so be as that lass be mated?"

"Married, is it you mean?"

He nodded.

The woman laughed, evilly.

"Married! not she, them play-gals seldom is; when my Mary wanted to go

in the ballet, I says, says I, not while you've got a mother.—Come here, Tommy, you young vermint, see if I don't leather you, come here, sir.—No, that young woman aint married, and aint likely to be, though there was a young spark as comed here with her, but he soon left; what else can they expect, say I, as makes themselves so cheap.”

“Then she is alone?” said the bargee huskily.

“Yes, master, if you don't count the baby.”

“A baby!” he cried; “and that mean-hearted skunk have left her.”

“Much she cares,” laughed the woman. “With them Hermanses a putting high-flown notions into her head; them as

thinks themselves too good company for honest folk, a picked up with the likes of her, as if she was Queen Victoria no less—" and with a vigorous dash at the offending Tommy, off marched the irate matron.

"Where did you say as I should find the young woman?" asked Bill Stone, following her.

"Who may you be, a coming and a questioning me?" she cried, turning sharply on him, "and a hindering me in my work."

"I asks your pardon, I am sure, mum, but as I be that misguided young lass's father, you see I have a kinder right to ask questions about her."

"Her father! well that alters the matter

in course," and she settled herself in the doorway, planting her arms a-kimbo ; " now my advice to you is—"

" Damn your advice !" cried he, fiercely, " tell me where my gal is, or leave it alone."

" Well, you needn't bite a body's head off like that—not but what I allus did say as a hasty timper were the best, and never did no harm ; it's them as broods and broods as means mischief—"

" Mother," interrupted little Tommy, " them play-gals left ever so long ago ; Miss Dolly she give me a halfpenny to carry her parcel to the bus for her."

" Did you ever see such little pitchers," laughed his mother, giving him a playful push ; " bless the child, how did he know what we was talking on ?"

"Do ye *mean* my wench, when you say them play-gals?" asked Bill.

"My good man you seem wool-gathering; did not I say as your daughter was a hactress."

"And wots that, mum?"

"Oh, hookey!" cried Master Tommy, "here's a blooming cove for ye; don't know what a hactress is! why it's a female as hacts; down at the theatre some on 'em come it awful strong, with their hair all hanging and in beautiful gownds."

Bill Stone's small eyes were full of angry bewilderment as Tommy danced an impromptu jig of delight on the curbstone.

"Excuse me, mum," he said, putting a strong control upon himself, for it would

have given him keen satisfaction to administer chastisement hot and strong to the offending urchin. "Did not you say as Bet lived in this yer house?"

"Yes, she do live here, but you won't be able to see her for these five hours, as she've gone to the theatre."

"I say, governor," cried the good lady's son, "suppose as you come to the play-house along o' me, I'll take care on you, and then you'll know what a play-hactress is, for you're a bit oldish not to know your way about. I'm the man for to show you, so now's your chance of a improving of your mind."

"That's the best thing you can do, sir, go along of him, and see the play, for it's a mighty fine sight they say, let



alone as you'll see your gal in all her glory."

"It'll only cost you a tanner," urged Master Tommy. "One for yourself and one for me," he added ; "that makes a bob all told," and the boy's sharp face looked up beaming with wild delight and expectancy.

"Come along then, yer young shaver," said Bill, "but none o' yer larks, mind, or it'll be the worse for ye."

Tommy danced along in front of him, half mad with joy, this going to the play was the realisation of his highest hopes. Often he had stood outside the theatres, scanning the posters, with despair in his longing eyes, and now—Tommy tossed his cap up and caught it, with an ear-splitting shout.

Bill Stone slouched heavily behind him, his hands thrust deep in his coat pockets, his sullen eyes bent on the ground. John Borrodaile, *alias* Anthony St Clare, beware ; for there are half-formed plans, dark and deadly, with you for their centre, floating vaguely through this man's brain.

"Here we are, master," cried the child.  
"Tip us your bob, and foller me."

Up many steep stone steps, they at last found themselves very near the roof of the large theatre-house ; it was intensely crowded, but Mr Tommy, whispering to Bill to push his way after him, crept to a nook he spied vacant in the front of the gallery, and there, by giving up all idea of sitting down, they could see the stage perfectly.

"Oh, my ! aint it scrumptious," said

Tommy, giving his companion a nudge. "Keep your eyes open, old man, and you'll see her presently."

Bill Stone did keep his eyes open ; never before had he seen such a sight ; the scene represented an enchanted forest, and some hundred young ladies of the ballet, under the pleasing disguise of fairy nymphs, were footing it merrily to gay music. Bill Stone not only kept his eyes open, but his heavy jowl falling in his astonishment left his mouth open too.

Backwards and forwards fluttered these ærial creatures, light as butterflies on the wing ; and then they formed a gracious avenue, and mademoiselle of the pointed toe sprang gracefully in, scarcely touching the ground as she gyrated ; then as if by

magic the scene darkened and the wings swallowed them up like the black jaws of an ogre.

Then there was another burst of music, and, with a merry laugh, in ran Prince Charming, the hero of the evening, followed by a band of dainty friends. Loud applause greeted this young gentleman, who bowed and kissed his hand; he was very pretty, and wore diamond earrings, and possessed fat, salmon-coloured legs, adorned by silver boots with very high heels,—in short, he was everything a burlesque prince need be; he said some funny things, that were Greek to our friend Bill, but which sent the thousand odd people collected into roars of laughter; he sang them a shrill song with a rattling chorus, which he had to sing twice over, till

he grew quite hoarse ; he flirted extravagantly with a pert little lady's-maid, in whom we might have recognised Miss Dolly Herman, and then this clever young prince showed his courtly bringing-up by dancing a breakdown, with surprising agility and spirit. Lastly, he confessed to his friends who were all more or less copies of himself, that he was desperately in love ; and giving one of them a letter which the pert maid had declined to deliver, begged him to act as postman for once, and " instead of waiting on the lady, to wait for her under yon spreading oak," said oak being of a foliage unknown, but as it had previously done duty as an elm, and once as a willow, it might have been policy to make it slightly misty. The prince and his companions having scampered off

the stage, with all the usual admired grace of such royal folk, the pretty little postman claimed individual attention.

“That’s her!” cried Tommy, giving Bill a push. “That’s Bet; my, ain’t she a stunner! look at her ’at!”

Bill Stone could scarce believe his eyes. This shameless, half-clad thing his girl? What did he know about that refinement of undress called tights; this ignorant, untaught half-savage had always associated women with modesty of apparel at least. This his Bet—who had lengthened her poor gowns as she grew into maidenhood. It stung him as though she had fallen to the lowest abyss of shame and degradation that she could stand thus and mouth and laugh and sing before hundreds of men, a thing to

stare at, and make sport of. He bowed his head and slunk out, pushing his way mechanically through the angry crowd, scarce heeding how they stormed at being disturbed, down the steep steps and out into the wintry night, hot with shame and passionate potent anger.

He had seen her in her glory, and it was in very truth a crown of glory to Bet ; she felt no degradation in her dress, to her it was the livery of success ; her art ennobled any sacrifice its follower might make. As her rich clear voice rang out, she felt its music as a bird glories in its own sweet notes, her head went back, and her body swayed, keeping time in glad forgetfulness of self and all around her.



## CHAPTER VIII.

“Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,  
Old Time is still a-flying ;  
And that some flower that blooms to-day,  
To-morrow shall be dying.”—

**S**O sung John, light-hearted and careless, with no memories of the past, with no forebodings for the future ; and his pleasant voice, rolling out the lines to an impromptu tune, sounded as though he at least was free from care. It wanted just six weeks to his wedding—that wedding that was to open the doors of



snug sleek prosperity, and make him independent of old Steve. Old Steve had cut up very well, he thought. Yes, he must own that; but then old Steve was a deep one and had his own motives. He laughed, the laugh of a young, thoroughly-contented man, at the mere idea of that ancient party, the colonel, thinking of Bernice. By Jove! it was too absurd; and then old Steve himself, he was a bit smitten once he felt sure. Yes, old Steve was a deep card! And John whistled.

It only wanted six weeks now to Bernice's wedding day; and Miss Riley was so busy, that she really had no time for one of those cosy little tea-parties for which she was so justly famed. Old Ghauntly meant his daughter's *trousseau* to be

worthy of her, and he had almost given Miss Riley *carte blanche*.

"I never see'd a young lady take less interest in her marriage outfit," grumbled the worthy little woman.

"Perhaps her mind's that full of her good gentleman," suggested Mrs Stone. "I see'd 'em drive by yesterday, and they made as pretty a pair as you'd wish to see."

And of a truth Bernice's mind was full of John. Time, that softens all things, had softened her aversion to this marriage; it was so new a thing for her, receiving homage, and it found in her a keen sense of satisfaction, and an appreciation of lover-like attention quite fresh and novel.

John, who had played the *rôle* of the

smitten-one so often that it had become second nature, and ready at the first cue given by a pretty woman, found no difficulty in fancying himself just a little bit in love. There was something very pleasant in the knowledge that this girl thoroughly believed in him—believed in him, he told himself, as he would have been had fate not set dead against him from the first, for John Borrodaile had too good an opinion of himself not to feel certain that under different circumstances he would have cut a very creditable figure.

Bernice's simple girlish life had held little that was in any way romantic; she had lived so thoroughly in a world of her own dreams, never mixing even in any of the trivial everyday gossips and scandals

round her, that she knew of no test by which to sound a lover's heart. He came to her as Theseus came to Ariadne, teaching her the tender eternal story in honeyed, lying words.

She had dreamt of just such a lover, she told herself, as the days wore on, and she chided herself often for the little lingering discontent that sometimes pierced the thin armour of her growing love for John.

So Borrodaile's plans bid fair to succeed, had it not been for one little woman, to whom of a surety he had never given thought in connection with this scheme of Bernice's marriage—Miss Marjorie Walrond. Now Miss Marjorie having secured the big earl, found herself without

employment, and we all know how much mischief lies fallow in a pair of idle hands. At first she had been vastly proud of her prize, knowing that many a fair damsel was sighing for the young man's broad acres; but with security came a dismal sense of his many shortcomings; to begin with, he was hopelessly heavy and dull, and his companionship now that the excitement of coquetting was over became so very monotonous that she often felt inclined to break off the engagement; not that she undervalued its advantages in any way, her vain, little heart quite revelled in the thought of being "My Lady," and wearing the famous Elmsden diamonds, but then—and Marjorie would screw up her rosebud mouth in extreme disapproba-

tion of any future passed by Lord Elmsden's side.

Now, Miss Marjorie being so thoroughly dissatisfied with poor Elmsden, and having, as I before said, a great deal of unemployed time, chose to fill it up by fancying herself in love with Anthony St Clare; she thought of him, she dreamt of him, she contrived to see him frequently, and so thoroughly filled her idle little head with his image that gradually this worthless young rascal became to her an embodied ideal of all that was worshipful and noble.

To do John justice, it was not long before he discovered how partial she felt towards him; this Adonis had been so lucky with women that he scarcely felt much won

derment—but it set him thinking, nevertheless ; and it gave him a delightful feeling of independence, for, with the egotism of youth, he fancied he had only to make his choice between these two fair women. He took the trouble to ascertain what fortune Marjorie was likely to have, and felt disappointed on learning that it was only the small sum of ten thousand pounds. Bernice, with her marriage settlement of twenty-five thousand pounds, and an untold heritage at her father's death was certainly a better match for him. So he argued, for, as far as affection went, John had not a spark of true love for either of them, his marriage was to be a speculation, and naturally he chose the one likely to prove most remunerative. But having

come to this sensible conclusion, he still did not think it necessary to grudge himself the gratification of a secret flirtation with Marjorie ; and that it was secret and romantically verging on a sentimental despair, made it all the more fascinating, and gave Marjorie an exquisite feeling of importance in her own eyes as the heroine of a hopeless love-affair. You see this young lady had so little wherewith to amuse herself, living in a dull little village, with a dull old father, and engaged to a dull young man.

Her undisciplined little heart sighed for passion and tragedy ; she would have gloried in being a queen of beauty, with lovers fighting for the touch of her hand, and Lord Elmsden's common-place wooing was, to say the least of it, monotonous ; but



still this wilful little woman would have been very much hurt had Lord Elmsden shown any want of devotion; it was the possession of two lovers that gave such piquancy to her ideas of flirtation, even fascinating John unrivalled by the earl's heavier claims, might have wearied this insatiate coquette; as it was, she looked upon herself as a most unfortunate maiden, torn between love and duty, sacrificing herself to Lord Elmsden, and striving to crush her real deep love for Anthony. All this was very pretty and pathetic, and Marjorie confided her secret to Mademoiselle Toinette, and received that young person's deep sympathy, in voluble broken English.

But the worst of having a confidant is, that he or she also feels the need of some

friendly ear into which to pour their secrets. Be sure, gentle reader, if you cannot keep your own counsel, it is madness to expect from others that discretion which you lack yourself.

Now Marjorie, in trusting her love-affairs to Mademoiselle Toinette, did not take this fact into consideration, and she would have been vastly amazed had she known how eagerly the kitchen, from the scullery-maid upwards, waited for the latest account of her *liaison*.

I think the scullery-maid pitied her, and on one occasion was moved to tears of purest sympathy; but cook, a buxom lady, who was supposed to have outlived sentiment, spoke of her frequently as "a young woman wot had

better take care, a-playing with edged tools."

The kitchen being thus set in judgment on its youthful mistress, it was not astonishing that Mrs Hastings should hear of Marjorie's flirtation.

This extraordinary woman took an extraordinary view of the case; instead of welcoming the scandal as an amusing break to the general monotony of village life, she shut herself up in her own room and paced the floor like a caged lioness.

"Marry John Borrodaile—*she!*" she cried, and her voice almost rose to a shriek. "Oh! the little fool!" and she smote her hands together. "That stupid Elmsden. What is he

thinking of, to win a woman and then lose her ?”

She dashed open an escritoire, and rapidly penned a note ; her whole person trembling with excitement.

“ If you love Marjorie Walrond,” she wrote, “ save her from an adventurer, who only wishes to marry her for the money she possesses. Anthony St Clare is not what he seems, he is no fit husband for Colonel Walrond’s daughter, and he is also engaged to another woman. Miss Walrond is foolish enough to meet him daily. If you doubt this, walk through the Chace, and you will find them any afternoon about three o’clock by the Swiss tool-house. Remember Marjorie’s youth ; that she is now of an age when most girls are in the school-room. Do

not let her ruin her whole life for the sake of a romantic infatuation."

She addressed this letter, without signing it, to Lord Elmsden, and posted it with her own hands.





## CHAPTER IX.

“Oft what seems  
A trifle, a mere nothing by itself,  
In some nice situation, turns the scale  
Of fate, and rules the most important actions.”

**I**T was evening when Mrs Hastings returned from posting her letter, there being no post office nearer than the town. When she entered her room she found Marjorie's French maid, Toinette, there.

“Oh, madam!” cried the girl, “I am come here to take the liberty to ask you

one kindness ; but madam has been out ; perhaps madam is fatigued ? ”

“ What is it you wish ? ” said the house-keeper, sinking into a chair and suffering the other to take her bonnet and cloak.

“ You are so kind, *ma chère* ; it is but a little matter ; my young lady is capricious ; such a lovely dress arrived but yesterday from Paris, and mademoiselle will not wear it ; she has said, ‘ I will wear my pink.’ ‘ But, mademoiselle,’ said I, ‘ it is old, faded ’ —bah ! you know my young lady, madam, *n’est-ce pas ?* ” and the Abigail shrugged her shoulders. “ They have no taste, these pretty English women ; one must be plain to study an appearance.”

“ What is it you wish ? ” repeated Mrs Hastings wearily.

"Oh! if you would be so kind as to help me sew the fresh lace in mademoiselle's *corsage*; I like not to let her go with the old, it is *vilain*, what you call in English, soiled."

"Where is she going?" asked the other sharply.

"*Est-il possible!* you do not know that to-night is the grand ball at mi lord's? If I were a young lady, like Mees Walrond, I would not wear an old dress at the ball of my *fiancé*; I would go as mi lady should."

So the young woman rattled on, and the elder woman rose mechanically, and followed to Marjorie's room, her brows knit, wrapped in thought. If she had only known of this ball she would have deferred



posting her letter till another day ; as it was, Lord Elmsden would get it in a couple of hours' time. What would he do ? would he openly seek a quarrel with John, or would he wait and watch—hardly ; the little Mrs Hastings knew of Lord Elmsden convinced her that he was more likely to act on impulse, and in that case there would be an open quarrel, and of all things she wished to avoid publicity for Marjorie's sake. As much as it was possible in her to love anything this strange woman loved her master's daughter, and while her fingers were busy with Marjorie's dress her thoughts were busy with Marjorie's future.

The worst that could happen would be better than her marrying John Borrodaile,

so she consoled herself ; better live and die an old maid ; better bury her fair sweet youth in the cold churchyard than live the wedded wife of Steven's ne'er-do-well brother. Mrs Hastings knew of Anthony St Clare's relationship towards Borrodaile ; the lawyer might hoodwink the astute Walrondites, but he could not hoodwink Mrs Hastings. It was now that she felt her position most keenly, for that she was masquerading the humble housekeeper the reader has long since no doubt discovered ; had she appeared in Walrond as Marjorie's equal she might have found means to speak to the misguided girl on the subject of her flirtation with John ; but the few words of caution that could have been spoken by a friend would ill become the

lips of a dependant, and Mrs Hastings was careful in all things to keep within the bounds of her assumed character.

“Madam is *triste*—sad, you call it,” said the maid, noticing the other’s preoccupation; “madam has trouble,” and she sighed, scenting a confidence.

“I was thinking could not you drop a hint to Miss Walrond that might prejudice her against Mr St Clare, for this evening at least; it seems a pity that she should give Lord Elmsden cause for jealousy.”

Antoinette opened her fine eyes very wide. “Oh, madam!” she cried, “what can it affect you? which is you to my young lady? It is only right that she should have many strings to the bow—and Mr St Clare is *bon enfant*,” she

added, remembering that young man's prodigal generosity on many occasions.

The housekeeper's face flushed, she regretted her words, they had been wrung from her almost unconsciously in her anxiety.

"You are right," she said, calmly; "but still I should be sorry to see the wedding broken off—a wedding would cheer us all up! and who knows!" (with a meaning smile) "they say one wedding makes many!"

"You allude to Monsieur Charles," said the girl, with a blush and a toss of her neat little head. "I care not one little bit for him, and if ever I marry it will be just the very contrary to him."

"Oh, fie!" said Mrs Hastings, affecting

a playfulness she was far from feeling. "Why lead the poor man to suppose you care for him?"

Mademoiselle Toinette, who was a sad coquette, laughed shrilly, but the house-keeper's words set her thinking, and visions of a snug little home, in which Charles, the butler, figured as "*monsieur le maire*" rose before her.

Thus the two women sat thinking, and the difference was, that while the work dropped unheeded from Toinette's hands, Mrs Hastings stitched and stitched in fierce energy of purpose, stitching her anxiety, her passion, and her doubts into the delicate lace that fell, like a fleecy cloud, over Marjorie's ball dress.

That young lady, running gaily into the

room, would have been mightily surprised could she have guessed the housekeeper's thoughts. The girl's whole heart was with John, the hope of seeing him soon flushed her cheek to a warmer glow, and gave a new brightness to her blue eyes. She had not seen him that afternoon; a note had arrived putting off their appointment, he was obliged to spend the time usually sacred to her with Banker Ghauntly. "But," John added, "we shall meet at the ball, my own, and there I hope to have the opportunity of saying something to you of the utmost importance — how I wish we could be always together, you cannot think how weary I am getting of my engagement." So the letter rambled on, and Marjorie drew one conclusion from

the whole tone of this affectionate missive, and that conclusion was that Anthony meant to ask her to break her engagement with Lord Elmsden and marry him. Marry fascinating St Clare, the very thought sent a thrill through her ! for it had really come to this that Marjorie Walrond loved John Borrodaile, and the more this love grew the less value she seemed to set on those glittering baubles, title and wealth.

“I could be very happy in a cottage,” said Marjorie to herself, with a vague idea of some pretty, rose-covered bower just large enough to hold John and herself, and—well, of course, a few other trifles. “I could not part with Jack,” continued this modern Julia ; “and Anthony would want a horse or two, but really I think we could

get on very well on a mere nothing. He told me he was not so rich as people think ; but then one does not want so much money, and papa would help us. Yes, I think if the dear thing asks me, that I will say yes !” and Marjorie’s face grew so wondrous glad that Mrs Hastings, who was standing gravely by, handing Toinette her mistress’s jewels sighed, reading the girl’s thoughts in her sweet love-lit eyes.

“If I had only the opportunity, I might say something to her,” she thought, and suddenly the opportunity came.

“Toinette, run down to the dining-room, and fetch me a glass of wine,” said Marjorie, nodding to herself approvingly in the long mirror. “I think I shall do, Hastings,” she continued. “Don’t you ?”

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“Indeed, miss, I think you look charming,” said the housekeeper. “His lordship will be very proud of you. People say his lordship and Mr St Clare are both most fortunate.”

“How Mr St Clare!” cried Marjorie, reddening.

“In having secured so beautiful a bride, miss—two pretty young ladies both engaged to handsome and wealthy gentlemen who worship the very ground they tread on. It is, indeed, a pleasant state of affairs.”

“Are you sure, Hastings, that Mr St Clare worships the ground Miss Ghauntly treads on?” said Marjory, innocently falling into the trap.

“Sure, miss! Why, he is devoted to her;

and every evening, they say, he promenades round and round the house long after most people have gone to bed. And then, he has made her such lovely presents. He loves her as well as his lordship loves you, miss."

Toinette returned with the wine, and Marjorie drank it off with a laugh.

"You are very romantic, Hastings," she said; but her eyes glittered, and there was no mirth in her laughter.





## CHAPTER X.

“Petulant she spoke, and at herself she laughed  
A rosebud set with little wilful thorns.”

**A**N Y O N E, peeping into the brougham that carried Marjorie and her father to the Abbey, would have seen them both silent—both thinking of one woman, but with this difference that while the man’s heart yearned towards that woman, aching with love and passionate tenderness, the girl’s hatred could have found no mercy had her rival been in her power.

"Bernice!" they both would have cried had their hearts spoken, and Bernice, calm and gracious, met them with an innocent smile for the colonel, and an innocent greeting for Marjorie. She was standing near the ballroom door, her hand through John's arm.

"Miss Walrond, you will let me have the next waltz?" he cried, eagerly.

But our injured coquette feigned not to hear, and turned quite gushingly towards Lord Elmsden who had hurried up to them.

Bernice laughed.

"Poor Anthony," she said, as Hugh and Marjorie walked away; "what have you done to offend Miss Walrond?"

"I am sure I don't know," said John,

with a smirk. "She's a conceited little thing, all very short women are, you know. I agree with the poet—

'A daughter of the gods, divinely tall.'

There is a divinity in height. Only a day or so before, this faithless young man had told Marjorie that he hated tall women; that a woman ought to be spiritual, *mignonne*, or any other pretty word significant for general smallness of person. Bernice, being what is commonly called a fine girl, accepted this compliment as a proof of John's partiality; and that satisfaction which is a woman's birthright, the satisfaction of knowing herself "the chosen one," filled her heart with glad complacency. It is thus many women drift into love; they

are flattered by preference, won by compliments, and end by loving their lover long after he has ceased to value the perfection which once attracted him. Bernice was beginning already to clothe John with the white garments of her ideal hero; seeing him through the glamour of imagination she treated him with a deference which was extremely flattering to that young autocrat; and he, feeling sultan-like displeasure at Marjorie's "absurd showing off," devoted himself to Miss Ghauntly, who little thought the pleasant evening she passed in any way due to a rival.

But John might have spared himself the task of punishing Marjorie, for that young lady was not there to benefit by the lesson he fancied he was giving her;

while walking dismally through the lancers with Lord Elmsden she had made up her mind that Hastings was an old gossip, and John in no way answerable for the idle stories the villagers chose to spread about him. "Walk round and round Miss Ghauntly's house," Marjorie now laughed at the very idea, and wondered how she could have been so stupid as to feel vexed at such an improbable tale; her heart quite ached at the pain she felt she had inflicted on "dear Anthony;" and, moreover, curiosity began to remind her that he had something of importance to say to her. On the whole, Marjorie decided she would "make it up, and be friends again," and having arrived at this amiable conclusion she quite longed to carry it out.

She had been so wrapped in her own thoughts she did not notice that Lord Elmsden was equally pre-occupied, and quite started when he said, solemnly, "May I have a few words with you?"

She raised her round eyes archly.

"You are not going to scold?"

"Scold you, my darling," he said, in a deep whisper, leading her to a secluded corner of the conservatory. "Heaven knows I have no wish to scold you."

She sat down, and he looked at her; a mere child she seemed in the half light, with her large, wistful eyes and clustering hair, and his heart went out to her in trusting love.

"My darling, my little Madge," he murmured, "you love me, I know," and



his arm stole round her lissom waist and drew her closer to him.

At first Marjorie had thought he knew something of her flirtation with Anthony, and being a little coward, she dreaded his reproaches, but now, fancying from his manner that her fears were groundless, she tossed her head, and laughed, saucily, "Love you, of course not, why should I?"

He caught her hand with unconscious force, and his eyes shone in the dim light,—"Marjorie, for heaven's sake do not trifle with me to-night, you are my promised wife, you need let no maidenly reserve stand between us ; tell me, Marjorie, this once, that you love me, me, and none other?"

She shrank from him ; homage and

passion are quite different; Marjorie loved homage, but passion terrified her; such passion as this, that stamped his fair young face with deeper lines than mere age might ever give.

"Answer me," he cried.

"You—you know I love you," she stammered.

"Marjorie, only an hour ago I received an anonymous letter telling me that you loved another; that you were thoroughly untrue to me, and that my rival is Mr St Clare."

Marjorie raised her eyes, those sweet, blue, innocent eyes, full of genuine surprise.

"Who could have written you such a letter?"

"Then it is false," cried the young man rapturously. "My own pretty Madge, and I was a brute and a fool to have frightened you as I did just now."

"Oh! what hard names, Hugh! So I have to thank some person or persons unknown for all this tragedy! Do you know what I thought?" peeping over her fan at him coquettishly; "I thought you had taken too much champagne."

A hot flush crept over his face. "Well, I confess it looked rather like it." His brief passion over, he was honestly ashamed of it. "I might have known it was pure calumny; some one is jealous of my having chosen you, Madgie; some one, perhaps, who would like to be Lady Elmsden herself."

From the day Lord Elmsden first surveyed himself with grinning complacency in a tall and glossy hat, he had been accustomed to find his person an object of interest to the fair. Mammas began to hunt him with praiseworthy perseverance; pretty girls turned their sweet eyes towards him; chaperons gushingly made him welcome; and he often found considerable difficulty in escaping from the practised wiles of those beauties, whose confidence and experience was the result of several seasons' heavy training. Till this winsome little Marjorie crossed his path, he had always flirted a little, soberly and heavily, with the season's acknowledged belle, feeling sure of success, such is the vanity of male things, had he seriously

entered the list; but never imperilling his digestion by falling in love. It was in vain those dear, persevering girls interested themselves with engaging artfulness about his equine pets, listening patiently, his conversation being as instructive as his stud groom's when the subject was horseflesh.

In Mayfair, if you are young, rich and *single*, you may ride any hobby you please, and as often as you please; there is no fear of tiring the good-natured houris who administer nectar in the shape of gratified vanity. But beware how you take one of these lovely, sympathetic beings to your bosom. Matrimony claims many rights, and among them the power to utterly annihilate your most cherished

hobby ; Miss Julia is a gentle, peach-faced lassie, but Mrs Julia is a formidable, loud-voiced matron, whose tongue is sharp with merciless home-truths ; and you will be a very Pecksniff if you have any vanity left after a sojourn of some dozen sober years in her orderly well-kept house.

“I’ll let whoever wrote that absurd letter see how little I think of it,” soliloquised Lord Elmsden ; “of course, all the girls are mad to think Madgie has secured the prize.”

Having chosen his bride, it seemed certainly highly improbable that she, the woman thus honoured, should prefer another, and he began to look at the whole matter in a new light.

His love for Marjorie was honest

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and true, and from the beginning she had given him plenty of encouragement; indeed the young ladies of Walrond had long ago made up their minds that Miss Walrond made "a dead set" at Lord Elmsden, and wondered "how she could go on so, really!" to them she was simply "a prettyish little thing enough; but so short you know."

"Let us have this waltz," he added aloud; and Marjorie rose eagerly, for she was beginning to feel heartily tired of this prolonged *tête-à-tête*. Passing Anthony, she raised a pair of penitent eyes, but the young man looked another way; it was his turn now, he thought, and he meant to make the most of it; all this

reduced Miss to such a state of meekness that Lord Elmsden began to congratulate himself on the Grisilda he would soon possess, for he was one of those men who admire submission in a woman.







## CHAPTER XI.

“Revenge maintains her empire in the breast  
Though every other feeling freeze to rest.”



CROWDED ballroom, full of pleasant sound, the frow-frow of silken skirts, the swell of spirited music, the ripple of happy voices and glad, careless laughter; all this was torture to a man like Walrond, whose heart was eating itself away in impotent love and bitter jealousy; he could see her, one fair woman, towering among her undersized sisterhood, her proud face softened,

a flush on her usually pale cheek, a sparkle in her usually calm eyes; thus he saw her, and on the arm of her betrothed !

Looking at him, who would have credited the storm that warred in his heart, a sober middle-aged man, clad in the unromantic evening dress of our unromantic nineteenth century; who would have credited him a very Cain in thought, one who could have promised himself to the nine-circled horrors of hell for a short twelve-month of love and Bernice.

He pushed open one of the long French windows, the night was bitterly cold but the chill air seemed grateful to his heated brow, and he stood and gazed at the white landscape and at the skeleton trees

with eyes that saw nothing but his own despair.

Should he put a bullet through his brain? that mad thought came to him more than once. Could he bear to hear the joy bells ring out, and see Anthony St Clare take Bernice "for better or for worse, till death should part them." Could he go on living in his empty home, with an empty heart, could he?—he clenched his hands, and swore an oath such as had never before passed his lips. Then there came over him a thought that, like some gentle presence, seemed to calm his storm-tossed heart—a thought so gentle, and breathing paradise; the thought of being beloved; only for once in his life to know that he made the heaven of some one life;

only for once in his life to experience the joy that steals like subtle perfume through the romance of every country, of every century. Some men gain this rich prize! It is hard for those who love for the first time late in life, to realise that the day is far spent, and that the dull, grey shadows of eve are creeping on slowly and surely; and Walrond laughed at these wild thoughts—a laugh that was bitter, and harsh, and scarcely sane.

Years ago, a mere lad, this hunger for love had come upon him, and he had thrown himself face forward on the soft, damp grass that covered his mother's grave, and wept the stormy but comforting tears of childhood; and through all the circles of time since the common-place had filled

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his life, like a healthy weed crushing down the delicate blossoms of romance ; but now, when he should have done with such things as passion and desire, to find his whole future laid waste and not worth the living, save by the side of one woman. Before this wealth came to him, he had found no time for sickly sentiment. Was this love that seemed like madness, but the result of that sweet *far niente* ? If so, he must find work for hand and brain, and so forget—forget—forget that fair grave face ! Ah, no ! forever and forever, while life left sense and memory, it would be impossible to forget. He realised now how dull and loveless that satisfied past must have been, and how doubly dull and loveless the unsatisfied future that stretched before him. If the

gods give a man a single desire, they have cursed him sufficiently. Remember how Naboth's vineyard dwarfed all King Ahab's splendour, and sapped the foundation of his content.

He turned away, in his angry impatience almost falling over a man who was kneeling on the ground the other side of the bay-window, his face flattened against the glass, peering into the ballroom; a man clad in tatters, with boots that scarce covered his feet, and with no hat on his tangled hair.

"What are you doing here?" asked Walrond sharply.

"I aint doing no harm, maister," he said, raising a haggard, uncouth face.

"Then get you gone," cried Ralph.

The man rose stiffly, and walked heavily away; something in the fellow's face, something in his weary walk, touched the squire, and he called him back and offered him a coin.

"I don't want none o' yer bits o' brass," said the man defiantly; "you gentlefolk fancy as money can pay for ill, but it can't; it can't nohow."

He was a tall man, gaunt and savage looking, with a wild weary face. Walrond felt interested in this poor, starved creature, who could refuse alms.

"Money can do a good bit towards softening trouble, my man," he said, kindly.

"May - be y'are right, sir; may - be  
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y'are wrong. Money! not all the gold as is not yet dug out o' the unknown mines would be to me like the thrashing I'd give the man what I've found to-night," and his face darkened with savage ferocity, and his hand closed over and shook a stout stick he carried. "Ay, I've found him," he continued, with a low chuckle; "many a night I've laid awake just thinking o' nothing else but the moment when I'd a found him. He's in there," pointing to the ballroom, "with a young miss on his arm, but I mean to spoil his pretty mug for him before this night be out; ay, I'll mill him, or my name aint Bill Stone."

"Who is it?" asked Walrond. This



must be some madman, he thought; and, indeed, he looked mad; so wild, so haggard, so possessed by the one idea that had never left him for months past.

“What they call him? That’s just what I’d like to know, maister. Many a name he’s gone by. Mind you as how a man escaped from the convict-hulks, there was a cry after him, but he weren’t found?”

“Yes,” said Walrond, “I remember.”

“Well, he came aboard o’ my boat, and they never thought o’ looking for him there; I hid him up. There was a goodish bit of money offered, and I might a took it easy enough, for he were a poor milk-sop of a fool, but

such a thought never entered my head; I treated him fair and honest, and he—curse him—in return, made a fool of my little lass I aint gotten the words to say much about it; but I a gotten the patience to wait and settle with him,—”

“But how came he here,” interrupted the squire. “I think you must have mistaken your man; all here to-night are Lord Elmsden’s friends; he would scarcely be intimate with an escaped convict.”

“I aint made no mistake, maister; he’s darkened his hair, but I’d know him anywheres.”

The master of Walrond was certainly in a curious position. If this man was

telling the truth, here was an ex-convict acting the gentleman, under his future son-in-law's roof. And if, on the other hand, he himself had been listening to the ravings of a lunatic, one of Lord Elmsden's guests seemed in danger of being roughly handled.

"Would it be easy to prove what you say?" he asked, feeling it rested with him to prevent a scene in the ballroom.

"Prove it, maister, ay it wouldna' be difficult to prove. If I was to say the word there'd be many a one as would recognise him."

"Will you do so; I will make it worth your while."

The man laughed.

“What, maister, does thou think as I be fool enough to go to them thick-headed folk at the hulk, and say my say, meek-like—No!” with an oath, “I aint that stupid; I mean to have the polishing of him; they can have him after as finds him.”

Walrond was beginning to grow impatient, and felt half inclined to threaten the fellow, but he reflected, if he were dealing with a madman, hostile words might only precipitate the disturbance he wished to avoid; the best plan would be to leave the man there, and go quietly round to the stables, and send some of the grooms to secure him for that night, at least.

He was kneeling on the ground in

his old position, his face glued to the glass; the squire fancied he had forgotten his presence, and was just preparing to steal off, when the fellow started up and seizing Walrond's arm in a grasp of iron, cried, with suppressed but intense excitement,—

“There he is, see him, maister; him with the tall lass, in a white gown!”

They passed the window, a happy, handsome, young couple, Bernice Ghauntly and Anthony St Clare!





## CHAPTER XII.

"When passions glow, the heart, like heated steel,  
Takes each impression and is worked at pleasure."

**M**ARJORIE felt she had spent a very poor evening. "I am tired and should like to go home, if you will find papa for me," she said,—

"Will you not have just one more dance?" urged Lord Elmsden, then noticing how thoroughly weary her little face looked, "I won't tease you, darling," he placed

her by Lady Grace and hurried off in search of the colonel.

“And how have you enjoyed yourself?” asked the old lady, with a yawn.

“Oh! so much, dear Lady Grace,” cried our deceitful little girl. “It has been a charming evening.”

“May I have this waltz?” Miss Walrond, said a soft voice in her ear, and Marjorie’s heart gave a great leap, and a sudden warmth came into her face.

“No, no, no,” cried the old lady, shrilly, shaking her fan at Anthony; “this young lady is left in my charge till called for—go and make yourself useful; neither of the Misses Flint have danced this evening, go and ask one of them.”

"I asked them, indeed I did, Lady Grace, and they both refused."

"Very sensible of them," said Marjorie, rising and putting her hand through John's arm. The Misses Flint, indeed! Now this pretty little thing in her teens despised those sober sisters for being elderly, dowdy and plain; and how scornfully her tiny nose was raised at the thought of either of them treading the mazy waltz with so comely a carpet-knight as *le beau* Anthony.

The whole ballroom seems brighter, and she feels no weariness now. His arm is round her, and together they go over the polished floor to the glad strains of a soft German waltz; how different his dancing to Lord Elmsden's! all the



early part of the evening she has been jostled and trodden on, but now she finds herself borne along smoothly, steadily, rapidly, as though they were floating on air; the music, the motion, the delight of being in the arms of the man she loves, all add to the intoxication of the moment, and Marjorie is supremely happy.

“Why were you so cruel to me?” he whispers, as the music ceases, and he holds her for one brief second closer in his arms.

“You were very happy, I am sure,” with a pout.

“That shows what an indifferent physiognomist you are, you quite misread my expressive features; I am like Figaro, I make haste to laugh, lest I

should weep. But, seriously, my darling, why did you snub me so unmercifully, when first I asked for a dance? I had been longing for your arrival, hovering about the door, thinking every new comer must be you; and when after all you made your appearance, you turned from me as though my request was an insult."

"I had no serious reason," said Marjorie flippantly; "I only wished to see what you would do."

"Was it just, was it kind?" cried Anthony warmly, throwing the just indignation of a wounded heart into his melodious voice, for the young fellow was at all times theatrically inclined. Knowing the power you possess over

me, you would use it to humiliate and pain! Ah! *cara mia*," he continued, in a softer tone, "I could not have found it in my heart so to try you. Did I think your affections were mine I should scorn to test my power and feed my vanity by a vulgar display of coquetry."

Marjorie's fair head dropped under this just rebuke, and the tears of penitence rose to her eyes, and hung on their long lashes.

"Ah! forgive me," she cried; "I have been punished, I have passed such a dull, dull evening."

"Poor little thing," murmured John, pressing the hand that rested on his arm; "I knew by my own feeling that you

could not be spending a very pleasant evening, Madgie. There are moments when I think, darling, that honour must give place to love, moments when I long to break the cold bonds that bind me to another!"

"Ah!" thought Marjorie, "how gladly would I break the cold bonds that bind me to Hugh," but she did not dare say so, so thoroughly had she learnt woman's great lesson, that dissimulation is necessary when dealing with the opposite sex; but although she spoke no words, her eloquent eyes raised to John's confirmed the young man in the conclusion he had already formed, that Marjorie loved him, and would gladly consent to be his.

His plans at present were vague and unsettled ; life with Bernice, certainly, promised comfort and opulence, but John was of a temperament essentially formed for affection, and somehow, try as he would to fancy himself in love with his beautiful betrothed, he could not disguise from himself that respect and admiration were the more appropriate words expressive of his sentiments towards her ; while, on the other hand, for Marjorie he experienced that brief holiday infatuation which so many mistake for love.

The little girl was strangely winning ; as his wife she would look up to and thoroughly love him, he felt certain ; once cured of the coquetry that at present made her—

“A rosebud set with little wilful thorns.”

She would blossom into a sweet, tender companion, happy in her home, her husband, and her children. But if he broke his engagement with Bernice, a thousand disagreeable consequences stared him in the face. To begin with, Marjorie was not of age, and her fortune entirely depended on her father's pleasure. Yes, Anthony decided, it was too perilous a game to play, this jilting Bernice. Still, when a man is young, and a maid is fair, it may chance that they find it rather hard to nip a flourishing flirtation in bud. So these two gazed into each other's eyes, and pressed each other's hands, and talked the language of love, with all its poetry and eloquence, in a crowded ballroom; they might have

been alone in some sweet, star-lit solitude, so thoroughly and mentally blind were they to the brilliant crowd around them.

"I had almost forgotten," said Marjorie suddenly, as they turned into the conservatory, empty and dimly lighted, where the air was heavy with the sweet, sickly perfume of many rare and lovely blossoms.

"Forgotten what, my beloved?"

"Such a curious thing has happened, Anthony. Someone has written to Hugh, telling him that I am false to him, and that I—I care for you." She looked at him, a saucy, dimpled, little face, and laughed. "Fancy anyone writing such absurd nonsense; and at first the poor man believed it—Oh! what is that?" she cried, in sudden alarm.

There were sounds in the grounds of angry words, oaths, and heavy blows. Anthony pushed open one of the conservatory windows.

“What is it?” he asked, sharply,

“Oh! it’s nought, sir,” answered the hearty voice of Nat Wyat, Lord Elmsden’s huntsman. “We are only removing of this yer vermint, who has took it into his head as there’s a cove here he owes a oner to. Be quiet, can’t yer,” he continued, enforcing his words by a kick at the helpless tramp, who, bound hand and foot, was entirely at the mercy of the four strong grooms who were dragging him off, but whose haggard face, as seen in the dim light, looked like that of an incarnate devil, so expressive of fury, baffled and impotent;



he foamed at the mouth, his eyes glared like those of a beast of prey, while he uttered blasphemies so horrible that even the stablemen shuddered to hear. "We be going to lock him up, sir, in one of the coach-houses; maybe by the morrow he'll a calmed down a bit," said Wyat.

But Anthony scarcely heard, for he had recognised the wan, uncouth face of Bill Stone; he comprehended it all in one swift, mental flash, how this man had sought him out, and was now prepared to do him some deadly injury.

"What is the matter?" cried Marjorie, clinging to him in pretty, half-feigned terror.

John roused himself with an effort, for the ghastly fear of the hunted was upon

him, and a wild instinct of flight filled his whole being.

“It must be some tipsy man who has broken into the grounds; let us go back to the ballroom, do let us go back, Anthony.”

Her pretty, white face looked up to his. There was a challenge in the tender, quivering mouth, and in the eyes, merry despite her fear. It roused him, as habit often influences our conduct when the mind is preoccupied. There could be but one answer to Marjorie’s terror. He put his arm round her, and drew the slight form closely to him, and their lips met in one long kiss. John’s quick mind, excited by fear and love—for at that moment he felt as though Marjorie were, next to his liberty, the most precious thing on earth—laid out

his plans ; he must fly, but not alone. No, he could not leave this sweet girl, she must be the companion of his flight.

“ We will not go in yet, my own,” he whispered ; “ there is nothing to fear, and I am by your side.”

The merriment had died out of Marjorie’s eyes, and they shone now bright and clear, darkened into wondrous beauty by the passionate love that stirred her being.

“ My darling,” he cried, “ can we not forget all the false prudery of society, and fly away together, you and I ? Can we not be free again, and snap asunder the fetters that have bound us so long ?— say my own, my precious love, will you be mine, my dearest, my wife ? ”

His whole manner was impassioned and

full of wild majesty, for he felt like one who would burst the bonds of slavery, and taking all it loved, escape and be free; and Marjorie, unconscious of the deep motive of personal safety that was the mainspring of his eloquence, felt herself roused into sympathy; and carried away by her lover's excitement; her answer was broken, faltering and spoken in a whisper, but it came straight from her heart, and was a girl's uncalculating and eternal surrender of self.





## CHAPTER XIII.

“Pardon is for men and not for reptiles,  
. . . And some men are worms  
In soul, more than the living things of tombs.”

**T**ALROND awoke the next morning with the bewildered feelings of a man upon whom some startling event has come. He rose early, and ordering the gig drove over to the Abbey, meaning to have a second interview with the tramp, but there he learnt that the man, after being cautioned

against entering the grounds on any pretext whatever, had been set at liberty.

Walrond felt thoroughly perplexed; if it was true that Anthony was an escaped convict; and with this new knowledge fresh upon him, there was an overwhelming conviction in the colonel's mind that it was true, and upon him had fallen the wretched necessity of exposing Bernice's lover. If it was indeed true, then Anthony St Clare was no fit husband for Miss Ghauntly, and their engagement must be broken off—but how should he proceed? he could not give Bernice's acknowledged lover up to justice; he could not stand in the witness-box, and publicly denounce him on the mere word of an unknown

tramp. His own love for the girl made another difficulty, for Anthony St Clare once removed, there came into his mind a radiant hope that he might yet win her to himself; and if she cared for Anthony, would she be likely ever to feel kindly towards her lover's destroyer. But withal, there was a wild, exultant joy in his heart, the barrier that seemed so insurmountable was about to be removed, and Bernice would be free! This time, there should be no idle dalliance on his part; he would not again stand aside, and let a younger wooer win her, he would come boldly forward and stake his happiness on a girl's yea or nay.

For a moment he was vexed that

he had caused the tramp to be secured ; most likely had he allowed matters to take their course, Anthony St Clare would already have been exposed ; but these base thoughts fled when he reflected on the pain such a sudden revelation would have inflicted on the innocent mind of Bernice—the veil that hid the monster to whom she was engaged must not thus suddenly and rudely be torn aside. Only part of Anthony's horrible crimes need ever to be known to the woman who had thought to be his wife. A forger, a seducer, a convict, whose very name seemed lost in the numberless aliases by which he had been known ! And apart from the sweet hope of one day



possessing her love, Walrond felt deeply thankful that he had discovered Anthony's secret before those sacred vows had been exchanged, which would have bound Bernice for life to a villain.

Colonel Walrond shut himself up in his study, and tried to arrange these incoherent thoughts into something like order. What should he do? that was the question; the best of men are likely to believe ill of a rival, and Walrond felt small doubt of Anthony's identity with the escaped convict; but a doubt would certainly exist in the minds of those whose feelings were unbiased by personal interest, and whoever sought to accuse Mr St Clare must bring proof—at present he had no proof, and the

time he spent in collecting evidence, would be time spent by Anthony St Clare in all the happiness of acknowledged and requited love; and utterly repugnant to Walrond's feelings was the thought of this jail-bird claiming from Bernice any of those freedoms sanctioned by betrothal.

"The villain!" cried our honest squire, pacing the room, "the cool, daring villain!"

Someone tapped on the door gently.

"Come in," said Walrond, in a voice of thunder.

And lawyer Borrodaile entered the room, showing all his fine teeth in a cat-like smile.

"Tell me," said Ralph, abruptly, only noticing the other's suave greeting by a

slight nod, "tell me all you know of Anthony St Clare."

"All I know of Mr St Clare," said the lawyer, placing his little, lean person in a comfortable arm-chair, while he laid his hat on a small table near, and commenced drawing off his gloves deliberately. "To begin at the beginning, as they say in the story-books."

"Damn your story-books!" roared Walrond. "What is the fellow's real name? What was the name given him at baptism, before he took to forging checks and uttering false coin? What was his name before he became a convict?"

The two men stood confronting each other; Borrodaile, who had started up at the squire's outburst, leant on the arm

of his chair for support, and seemed ready to faint, and Walrond towered above him, his face flushed and his eyes glittering with passionate impatience.

“You know,” he continued, laying his hand heavily on the lawyer’s shoulder. “It was you, you mean-spirited little cad! who foisted him on society here; it was you who spread the tale of his wealth; it was you who indirectly led up to his engagement with Mr Ghauntly’s heiress.”

Even in his wrath his lip refused to utter Bernice’s name, that name, the name of the woman he loved, lay sacred and shrined in his heart, and it would have seemed sacrilege to pronounce it in the presence of the man before him.

Borrodaile shook off Walrond's hand. "Do you know what you are saying? Do you know that you may be called upon to prove this wild story, and to apologise to me for the insulting words you have used?"

Walrond stood and faced Stephen, trying to read that crafty narrow face by the light of his own great soul. If, indeed, he had wronged this man— But the thought died unfinished, and he turned and paced the room.

Borrodaile perceived his advantage.

"Someone has maligned my young friend—most cruelly maligned him!" he murmured, softly.

"If I could be convinced of it!" cried the colonel.

“Would you favour me with the slanderer’s name ? ” continued the other. “Perhaps there may be some motive for such base calumny.”

Walrond reddened. The slanderer’s name ! He was gradually losing his first firm conviction of Anthony’s guilt. A doubt entered his mind—a doubt that, widening gradually, began to stamp the whole story as improbable in the extreme. Why had he been so ready to condemn this young fellow, on the mere word of the first ragged wretch who crossed his path ?

Walrond was an honest, upright man, and when he began to perceive how headstrong and impetuous he had been in this matter he turned towards Borrodaile in swift repentance.

“I own I have been rather hasty, and that some apology is due to you for the warm words I used just now.”

How far our worthy squire might have carried his confession, I know not ; for at that moment an interruption occurred ; a servant entered the room, and handed Colonel Walrond a small sealed packet, saying that it had just been left by Lord Elmsden’s groom.

The man replenished the fire and swept up the grate. While he was thus busy, his master opened the parcel. It contained three separately folded notes. No sooner had he read the first few lines of one of them, than a great change passed over his face, which Borrodaile noticed with curiosity.

It ran thus :—

“DEAR COLONEL WALROND,—After reading the enclosed letter from your daughter, you will not wonder at my resigning all pretensions to that young lady’s hand. Finding that I have been the dupe of a crafty child—for I can call her nothing else—I think it my duty to make known her intentions to you; for I should be grieved to hear that any harm had happened to one whom I once fondly hoped to make my wife. I should advise you to look into the young man’s antecedents ere you give your daughter to him; for, remember, he came here an absolute stranger, and in town I never met him anywhere—in fact, never even heard of such a name; and as he once informed



me he was member of no club, I fear you may find it difficult to hear much about him. You, as a man of the world, can well understand the shock my feelings have sustained in this matter, and will, I am sure, not be surprised when I inform you that I start to-night for the Continent,—Sincerely yours, ELMSDEN.”

Walrond crushed this manly, straightforward letter in his hand, and opened the second note, which was covered with blots, and carelessly written.

“DEAR HUGH,—I cannot rest until I have written to you. I own I have deceived you; for it is true I love *him* better than anyone else in the wide world. Do not worry about me, for I am not

worth it. I have been real bad to you. We mean to get married in London by special licence, and we are going away together this afternoon, so as not to pain you by our wedding.—Forgive and forget,

“MARJORIE.”

The colonel hastily opened the third enclosure, which proved to be the anonymous letter Mrs Hastings had posted to Lord Elmsden.

“Villain and liar!” cried Walrond, turning on Borrodaile, with a look so furious that the little man quailed beneath it.

“Is Miss Walrond at home?” he asked the servant who was just leaving the room.

“No, sir, miss went out about ten minutes ago;” and after waiting a moment the man hastened to the kitchen with his news—

“Lord Elmsden a-going to Paris, all in a hurry, his groom said, and the master’s that put out at the intelligence!”

“Ay, he’s a-found her out,” said cook. “Did not I tell ye as that girl would fall between two stools, and serve her right, for a nicer gentleman than his lordship never walked the earth.”

And the kitchen-maid sighed and murmured something about choosing the man one loved, for this grimy little scullion was very romantic.

Walrond re-read Mrs Hastings’ note, and his face grew stern and hard with a fixed

resolve; walking over to the whip and stick rack, he selected a stout horse-whip; lashing it in the air, to the inward terror of Stephen, who, as I have before stated, had a decided horror of bodily chastisement as applied to his own person.

“Read these,” he said, throwing the three letters in the lawyer’s face. “Read them, you liar, and have your answer ready by my return.” Without another word he left the house. Stephen stood at the window watching him, as soon as he was safely out of sight he glanced through the three missives, and his face grew positively hideous with malignant rage at the trick Anthony had thought to play him.

“But he’ll get paid out,” cried the little man through his teeth, “in a way that he

scarcely expects," and putting the letters in his pocket, he set off running towards the Swiss tool-house, where he rightly conjectured that Walrond had preceded him; this haste soon brought him up to the colonel, and not wishing that gentleman to see him, he slackened his pace and proceeded to follow with caution.

The lovers were standing outside the picturesque little tool-house. Anthony's arm was round the girl, and so engrossed were they in the plans they were making, that they never heard Walrond approach, and Marjorie started with a shriek from John's arm when she saw her father seize him by the collar and commence thrashing him with a will, calling him impostor, thief, and convict!

Anthony was so taken aback by this sudden attack that for a few seconds he seemed incapable of resistance, but the word convict roused him, and turning, he wrenched the whip from Walrond and threw it away; the two men now wrestled together, Anthony's intention being to throw the colonel and make off, when suddenly Walrond, to whom anger leant the strength of a giant, raised the young man up, and dashed him on the ground, where he lay stunned and motionless.

"Look to your friend," said the squire, turning to Borrodaile, "and warn him that if he ever crosses my path again, I shall not hesitate to give him up to justice."

He coolly picked up his hat, which had fallen off in the struggle, and drawing Marjorie's hand through his arm, led her away.

END OF VOL. II.

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